THE CLASSIC
ADVENTURER

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

For a boy with a fertile imagination, and an obsession with the Fighting Fantasy books, *Twin Kingdom Valley* whisked me through the screen, and into a fantasy world of babbling brooks, Forests, Orcs, Trolls, Goblins, Dragons, Kings and treasure!

I played as many adventures as I could, but It wasn't until I owned a ZX Spectrum and Fergus McNeill's *The Big Sleaze* that I encountered the same immersion with another game. A friend and I spent many weekends hunched over the keyboard, notepad and pen, determined that Sam Spillade would find the missing Maltese Bullfinch.
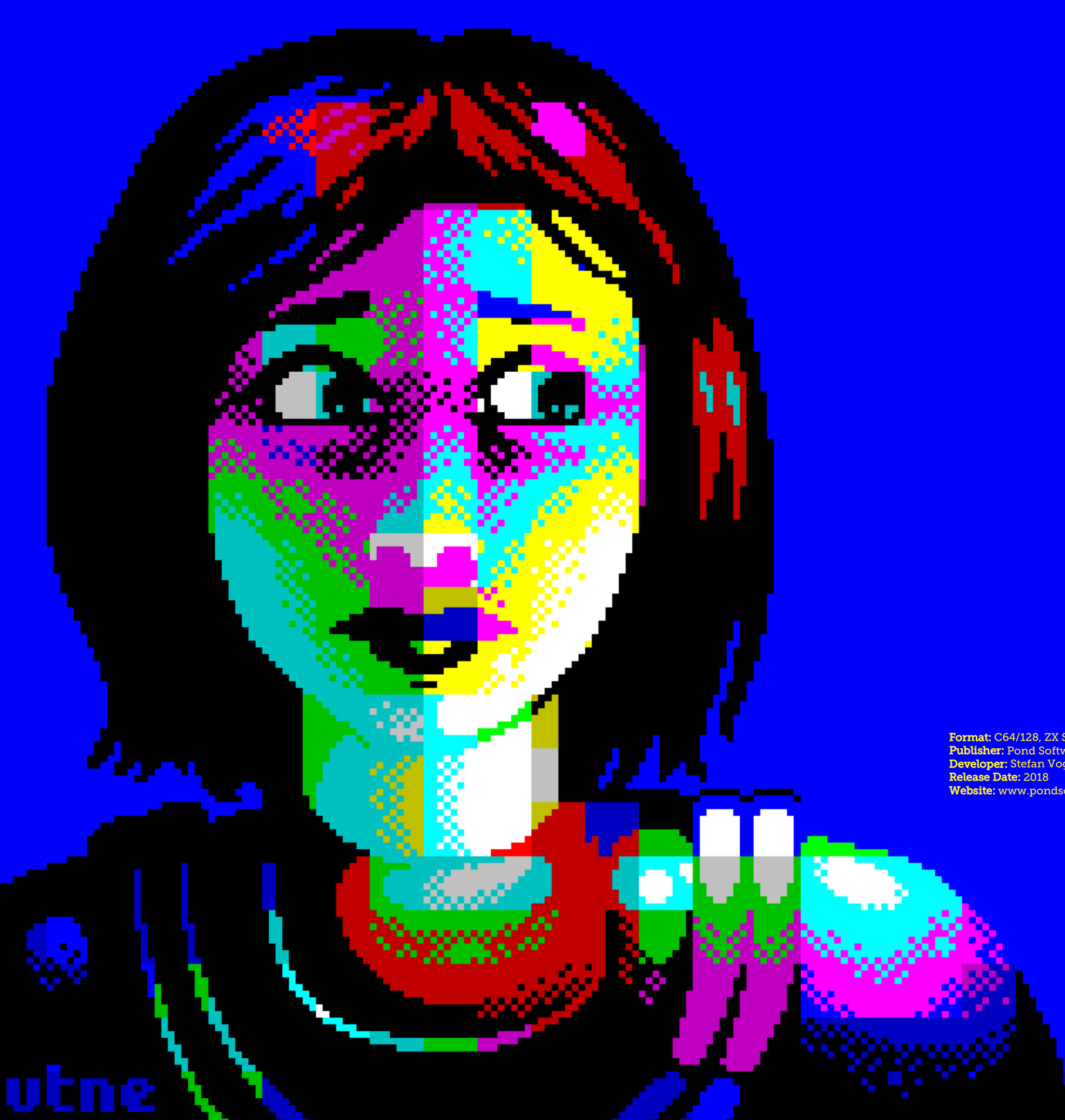
I'm therefore delighted that both Fergus and Trevor feature in this celebration of classic adventure games, along with many other adventures and authors that transported legions of other kids to far flung corners of their own imagination.

Mark James Hardisty, 2018

CONTENTS

HIBERNATED

A place worse than death? That's the Science Fiction subject matter of **Stefan Vogt** and *Hibernated*, the first of a classic trilogy of adventure games centered around space explorer Olivia Lund and her robotic companion called Io.

Format: C64/128, ZX Spectrum, Amstrad and DOS
Publisher: Pond Software
Developer: Stefan Vogt
Release Date: 2018
Website: www.pondsoft.uk/hibernated.html

[Stefan Vogt] The idea to write an adventure dates back to the days of my childhood. Text adventures have always fascinated me and even today I still find [them] profound and captivating. [...] It is not only the technical know-how that is important to create a really good adventure, [...] a certain age and related life experience [is] necessary to write a really good, interactive novella, [as well as] a writing talent to stand out from the broad mass of average adventures. At the age of twelve years, I just said to myself that I'm not ready yet, so I put the idea in one of the drawers of my subconscious. [...] In 2013 I chose to revive those great memories and I became a collector. At first I focused on 8-bit home computers, later also on games and software. Soon the thought came back to write my own game, and [...] I started my first serious attempts in 2015 when I programmed my own, portable adventure engine. The source code was C based and I could compile it for both 6502 and Z80. After a while I realized that I was way too involved in technical details, when I actually wanted to focus on the process of writing.

[...] *The Quill* and its successor *PAWS* [*Professional Adventure Writing System*], both from Gilsoft, [...] had an easy-to-learn scripting language, a fast parser, coloured texts and a brilliant documentation. I've finally found a tool and now I was able to concentrate entirely on writing my own adventure, which I did immediately.

Can you give me an insight into how you constructed the story and then made it ready for *The Quill?* Did you write something akin to a screenplay, with adventuring in mind?

I already had the basic plot in mind for several years. *Hibernated* was planned as a trilogy from the beginning. Each part is a complete narrative strand in a [...] coherent story. I think this has some advantages. [...] The actual game design was rather a very classical process and took place just like it was done in the 80s: on a piece of paper. [...] First I designed a game map and I gave the respective places meaningful names, defined movable and immovable objects. [I then] created a vocabulary which controls the interactions with the

parser and made a lot of fundamental [narrative] decisions. [...] In the last step I wrote a kind of solution. On this basis new puzzles emerged, and already predefined puzzles were refined. It was a blueprint of what the finished game might look like from the player's point of view. [...] The whole creation process may seem a little anachronistic today, but that's how games were written back then and thus that's how the Gilsoft systems expect you to work. The detailed room descriptions and messages were the only texts written directly into [*The Quill*], as that gave me the feeling of actually being a writer that works on a novella.

What were your influences for the theme and story? It is very reminiscent to me of Level 9's Science Fiction thriller, *Snowball*?

Unfortunately, I never played *Snowball* from Level 9. I bought the trilogy some months ago because it is actually one of those games I more or less missed in my youth. A pity, since science fiction adventures are pretty much my thing. Personally, I think the plots are quite different. It's true that the protagonist in *Snowball* wakes

"The focus of a text adventure should be on experiencing a story. [...] I wanted to create a constantly high tension and a touching atmosphere, supported by a slight uncertainty."

unexpectedly from cryosleep and has to face serious problems, but that basically is the only parallel. The stories themselves are very diverse, so are the goals in the games. The storylines drift even further apart when I think of *Hibernated 2*, which is planned for 2019. In *Snowball* you have to save the sleepers, in *Hibernated* you have to solve a thousand year old mystery. The actual goal of *Hibernated* becomes apparent very late in the course of the plot. It is meant to be that way. I wanted to create a constantly high tension and a touching atmosphere, which is supported by a slight uncertainty. This may have been the first cognition of modern literature and game development I added to my game.

Can you give me an example?

[...] One of the main tasks in *Hibernated* is turning Io [a robot] into a positronic chipset. This requires various upgrades. Positronic computers play an important role in the science fiction series Perry Rhodan, of which I am a big and confessing fan. The idea of the positronic brain goes back to Isaac Asimov's publication "The Positronic Man" [.. and its] bridge between a strict computer and a thinking being on an electronic basis. Systems like these, of course, may be the technology of an advanced civilization that has travelled the stars for thousands of years, such as the builders of the stranded alien ship in *Hibernated*. As a logical consequence, Io, the control unit of the Polaris-7, must be able to interact with the extremely advanced network of the aliens. [...] Another inspiration was a radio play from the German science fiction series "Jan Tenner". This episode was called "Das Totenschiff", which translates as "Ship of the Dead".

The style of screen and layout is very reminiscent of Infocom games on the C64 - did you go back and play any other adventures for inspiration?

Well spotted. The colours resemble one of my favourite adventures on the C64, *The Lurking Horror* by Infocom. [...] The coloured accents in the text, for example, the cardinal points or the objects, that did actually not exist in Infocom games [are] important to me, because [they] significantly help [...] readability. I probably should mention that the start screen is almost identical to Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. There is release information, a date-based serial number and a version information for the interpreter. [...] It is a homage to he masters of interactive fiction and help[s] creat[e] a familiar environment for the player.

I wouldn't categorize *Hibernated* as interactive fiction, by the way. This term is accompanied by a certain expectation. The complexity of the Infocom works, as much as I love them, can be overwhelming for the less experienced player. The focus with *Hibernated* was on exploring a story without being too artistic about the actual requirements for input, so even players new to the genre could enjoy the game.

Does Germany have a strong adventuring community?

Absolutely. However, the German market was dominated by far fewer home computers than in England. [...] Here almost everyone had a Commodore 64, and if you didn't have a Commodore, you owned a Schneider [Amstrad] CPC. [...] Many German adventure games were created in BASIC and were published as listings in magazines like the Happy Computer or the 64'er. A very well-known German adventure game is *Zauberschloss*, which can be translated as *Magic Castle*. We also played a lot of English-language games in Germany.

So it was a natural pairing for you to use the *The Quill* and the C64?

The basic decision for the C64 as the first system for *Hibernated* was quite pragmatic. I had one in my youth, [and] it's not always about using the best system, but about paying tribute to your very own wonderful memories.

[...] I would have preferred to use *PAWS* [but it] was never released for the C64. [...] In 2017, together with Tim Gilberts [we] released a special 4-word parser variant of *The Quill* [from the secret Gilsoft archives] [...] [that was] used in 1986 to port the commercial game *Bugsy* from the Spectrum to the C64. With the 4-word parser more complex adventures are possible.

How long did the game take to develop? Did writing the game in English, not your natural language, make things more difficult?

Development had taken 4-5 months, leaving out previous attempts and escapades. But in between there were always some breaks, because life doesn't only consist of adventures. After completion I needed another two months to make the game available to a closed circle of experienced players, including Tim Gilberts, and then to incorporate their recommendations.

Since I was basically very open to feedback from the testers, we were able to significantly improve the game: for example, a puzzle that was considered too difficult was completely removed from the game and replaced by a new one. In some places clearer hints were implemented and of course bugs had crept in. I learned a lot in the beta phase.

Writing the game in English didn't make much difference to me. Compared to the German language, English is a very simple language. I also work for a large, globally active company. Fluent communication in English is a basic requirement of my day job.

You have some "modern" design ideas – not dying for one, a comprehensive in-game hint system, a "GO TO <place>" to reduce the movement in the map, and the addition of as many synonyms in the vocabulary as possible. Was this a determined attempt to remove some of those annoyances and frustrations from early adventures?

I will answer this with the words of Roland Deschain, the hero of

Stephen King's epic "Dark Tower" series: the world has moved on. Of course, many decisions in the *Hibernated* design process were accompanied by an insight. Actually, we don't want to go back to the sometimes nasty and unfair games of the 80s. This is especially noticeable when you load a game from childhood and then realize that it is not as good as you thought.

[We don't] want to die of hunger after 5 turns because we can't find an apple, nor do we want to make countless entries until we have finally found the right verb noun combination. Annoyances of the kind you aptly call them were [...] the reason for many players to not like the genre. These concepts certainly belong to the anachronism of the very early adventures, but even back in the day, the notable adventure publishers had more and more abandoned such concepts. You want to create an experience and not leave the player behind with frustration and bad design. One of the first puzzles in *Hibernated* is about opening a door. Once you have found and carry the key [a biometric passport], you can open the door with USE PASS, OPEN DOOR or UNLOCK DOOR.

You have also excluded the notion of "search-ing" rooms. This is an irritation of mine, and the text adventure equivalent of having he scour the entire screen in point and click adventures for items.

[...] With *Hibernated* I have intentionally taken a completely different path. In many early adventure games you could discover various hidden objects with the command SEARCH ROOM or EXAMINE ROOM. [...] The first of the two variants shows rather a bad design concept and is simply unrealistic in my opinion. The second variant immensely hinders the flow of the game. *Hibernated* has none of these problems, and you don't have to SEARCH to find something. Any interaction-enabled objects relevant to the progress of the game are highlighted in colour. When a useful object is in a room, you either see it immediately, or it emerges from a highlighted object, such as a locker.

It is not relevant to hunt for hidden objects. It's annoying to force the player to do this. To test this, I built in a puzzle right at the beginning
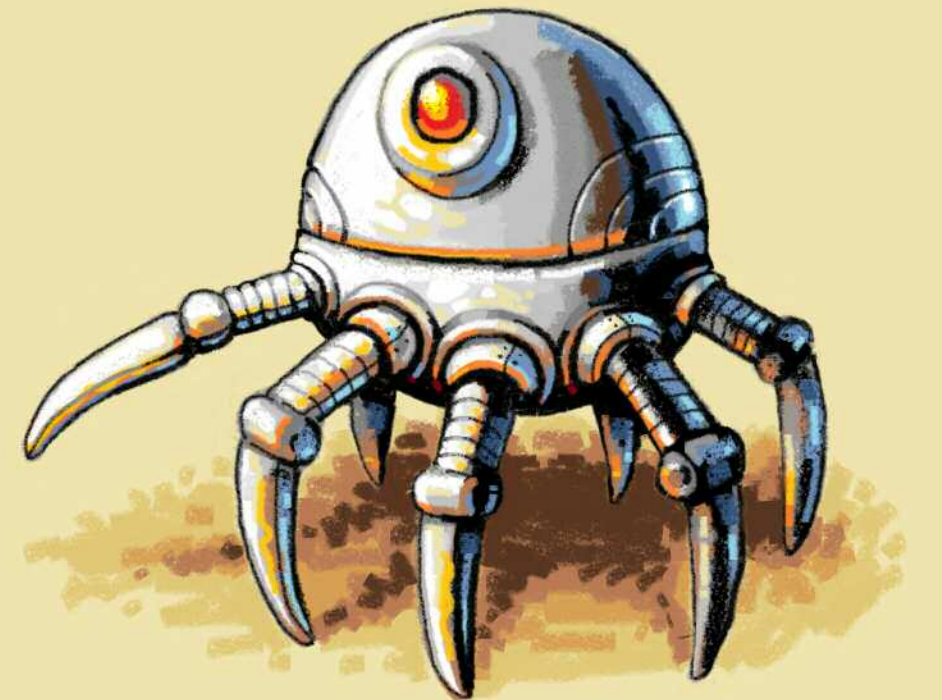
SOUTHERN CORRIDOR Flashing red warning lights are reflected on the palladium glass walls. The hibernation chamber is to the WEST, while your private area is to the EAST. In the NORTH, you get to the Polaris-7 command unit, protected by a security door. It divides the narrow corridor into two halves. The docking bay is in the SOUTH.

You notice:
security door (locked)

What will you do now?
>OPEN DOOR
You slide the pass into the reader. A green light indicates authorization. The door opens.

What now?
>█

[Above] An early scene from the game, showing an example of the helpful puzzle solving programming behind *Hibernated*.

unspectacular location ever integrated into a spaceship. Naked walls and steel shelves convey unprecedented sterility. The best thing about this interstellar broom closet is that you can leave it in the WEST.

You notice:
flashlight (off)
toolbox

What are your instructions?
>GET LIGHT
You can't take that with you.

What will you do now?
>ADMIRE TOOLBOX
No problem, just go ahead and admire some things while you die here in this icy grave.

What are your instructions?
>█

[Above] Even though you're in deep space and facing certain death, there's still room for humour in *Hibernated*.

of the adventure, which could only be solved if you searched a certain room. I don't think I need to mention how devastating the criticism was. The beta test phase confirmed [...] there are things that just don't work anymore. In future releases of the *Hibernated* series, I'm even thinking about disabling the colour highlighting of objects once you can no longer interact with them. A pragmatic solution for giving the player a hint that the work is done at the current location.

What other "rules" and design philosophy do you have?

The focus of a text adventure should be on experiencing a story. This certainly goes hand in hand with the expectations of modern gaming culture. We just don't have time to spend months playing a game these days just because we can't get anywhere. For this reason an adventure game should be designed as simple as possible, without neglecting the basic character of the genre, namely solving puzzles.

There is a thin line between challenging the player just enough to make good progress with the game, but making him feel neither underchallenged nor overchallenged. There should be sufficient hints to get the player in the right direction, and the parser should also suggest that it reacts intelligently to the input. Here's an example: when I'm lying in a bed in an adventure game and there's a knock on the door, the inputs STAND UP and ANSWER DOOR both

should do. If I want to answer the door and let the parser know, it is clear that I am aware that I have to get up for this and this intermediate step should then be taken automatically. Of course you can push the reactions of the parser [but] classic adventure games have to deal with the limits of an 8-bit system. You have to find a good middle course for yourself.

Did using *The Quill* over *PAWS* hinder your creativity in any way? Did you have any features, such as Non-Playable Characters that were difficult to implement because of its restrictions?

No. *The Quill* isn't actually as limited as you might think. The only limitation is the 2 word parser, but that in turn makes many things easy, both for the developer and the player. The more complex a parser is, the more complex can be the demands on the player. Here we are again at the thin line. [...] Even with an advanced tool like *PAWS* I would try to maintain a certain simplicity and elegance for the player. As far as the scripting language in the background is concerned, [...] in principle you can achieve almost as much with *The Quill* as you do with *PAWS*. This is also proven by the fact that many *PAWS* games were ported from the ZX Spectrum to the C64 with the 4 word parser variant of *The Quill*.

There are of course known restrictions. For example, the tool can't handle NPCs, while *PAWS* does, but I was able to solve this in a very

simple way: I integrated NPCs as objects and scripted them afterwards. As far as this is concerned, however, I think it was an advantage that I am a programmer and approach problems accordingly from the perspective of a programmer.

Hibernated is a text-only game, even though the graphics add-on *The Illustrator* is available for the C64. Was that a meaningful decision?

Yes, it was both a very meaningful and a deliberate decision to not include graphics in the game, apart from Vanja's wonderful loader picture.

Any plans to include graphics in the first game, or subsequent titles in the series?

There are no plans to add graphics to the game in the future. It is also debatable whether an adventure game really can be "enhanced" with graphics. I think the exact opposite is true. The mind creates the most beautiful pictures. If you allow this, you will reach an incredible depth and a very individual experience. Who would I be to wrest this freedom from the player by predefining a view of a location that has emerged exclusively from my imagination?

[..] There's a great BBC interview with Dave Lebling and Marc Blanc

from Infocom on this topic. They talk about some of their concepts when they got visited for [the TV series] Micro Live in the 1985 while developing *Spellbreaker*. Marc speaks very clear words why they decided against graphics in their own adventures and these views largely coincide with mine. Just because you can do something doesn't mean it makes sense to do it.

What are your most favourite and least favourite parts of the game?

Since I've dug up almost every cliche I've ever loved with *Hibernated*, there's really nothing I don't like about the game. I especially like the black humour, which is sometimes more and sometimes less subtle. This contrasts a little with the basically serious background of the story, but has always been common practice in adventure games. It enhances the plot a bit and relaxes without ever drifting into the really ridiculous. There is also a puzzle in *Hibernated* which tricks the experienced adventure player. I had already been praised in the beta phase for that. Unfortunately I can't reveal more details without spoiling.

What has the reception to the game been in the community?

The game was warmly welcomed and praised for its storyline and touching atmosphere. There even was a quite well-known German Twitch streamer who played the game live in 8 hours, together with

his audience. They all seemed to have great fun. He then admitted that it was one of the best games [they'd played] in a long time. *Hibernated* will be featured in [Fusion Retro Books] Zzap!64 and Crash Annuals this year. All this makes me very happy, of course. The point of a game is that the players love it.

You engaged with the community from the start and released several early versions of the game – was that a positive experience, and did the collaboration take the adventure to any new areas?

I would even go one step further and claim that it was not just a positive experience, it was a necessary experience. I don't think the beta test took the game into new areas. I already had a pretty clear idea how a classical text adventure could work today. Rather, it was about substantiating or disproving my theses. On top of that, I am a person who cultivates an open feedback culture and deals with it very positively.

The testers also gave me a lot of valuable information, for example if they were missing hints or had discovered a bug. In the end, I was able to acquire so much knowledge in the beta phase that I think I can test future games in a smaller circle. With *Hibernated 1*, almost 15 individuals were [involved]. Tim Gilberts, who already conducted the quality inspection of the *Gold Collection* Adventures at Gilsoft, was one of my most important guides. All of this has certainly made the game a very polished experience.

You've now ported the game to the Spectrum and Amstrad, both using *PAWS* and have even produced a CP/M version that can be compiled for larger range of computers?

In fact, I developed the ports with *inPAWs*, even if the finished game looks like a *PAWS* game at first glance. *inPAWs* is a programming language and compiler that converts the source code of a single text file into a *PAWS* database.

I was able to compile variants for ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and C128, CP/M and DOS with only one source file. [...] *inPAWs* also has a much better text compression routine than *PAWS*, which ultimately enabled me to make a 64k game like *Hibernated* run on a 48k spectrum.

The variants for C128, Spectrum, CPC and DOS have an advanced parser that supports better expressions and chain commands, though the two-word logic is retained. I could for example type EXAMINE SUIT THEN TAKE IT or GO SOUTH AND PRESS BUTTON.

The game has secured a physical release with Pond Software. What should we expected from a boxed version, and what are your thoughts on new publishers for old 8-bit machines?

Isn't it wonderful to see what's happening right now? With a lot of love old traditions are revived and old values are lived again. I think it's great that young publishers follow the steps of the big houses and distribute great titles and great joy with small budgets. I myself am invaluably glad that Pond has decided to publish my games. Pond shares my vision that the world is ready for high-quality text adventures again.

When I bought Graham [Axten's] *Bear Essentials* and the box came to my house, I almost cried with joy. I was sheerly impressed by the love of detail that went into the release and told me: that's how you do it! Now when I consider that we also going to release the *Hibernated* series with lots of magic, bonus material and of course feelies that are characteristic for adventures, I'm completely overwhelmed. By the way, there will be one physical release of *Hibernated 1* per platform: C64 (with the C128 variant as B-side), ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and MS-DOS. Even on both disk and tape, where possible. And because we want to satisfy the players as much as possible, the physical release comes with a bonus adventure. If that's not enough motivation, I don't know.

And what can you tell me about the "bonus" adventure?

It's called *Eight Feet Under*. Did you ever wonder what exactly the robot spider did when it ran into the wall to help Olivia? In the bonus adventure for the physical release of *Hibernated 1,* you will be able to experience this for yourself.

Eight Feet Under is a futuristic, interactive novella that introduces the second main character of the *Hibernated* science fiction series: Vermin Extermination Unit 972, also known under the nickname Vlad. You have to travel back with Vlad into the eternal darkness of the Lyra constellation, save Olivia and Io from the eerie dangers and secrets lurking in the depths of the stranded alien ship.

[...] [It] won't be available as a download, it will be exclusive bonus content to the physical release of *Hibernated 1*. Instead of continuing the story, Vlad's adventure tells a previously unknown part of the events of *Hibernated 1*.

What are the next plans for the continuation for the trilogy? Do you plan to use *PAWS* and enhance the games or stick with *The Quill*?

As a matter of fact, I'm working with Tim Gilberts on the next big thing. [...] What many people don't know is that there is a *PAWS* interpreter for the C64. No wonder it's not known, because it's more or less a secret. *PI64* was developed in 1987 by Tim Gilberts for CRL and St. Brides to provide a way to port the St. Brides games from the Spectrum to the C64 without much effort. *PI64* consists of a C64 binary and a small converter tool, which makes a Spectrum database game work on the Commodore 64. If you take a closer look at *Jack the Ripper* [a controversial 1987 adventure published by CRL] you'll see the software in action and probably say to yourself: why didn't I notice that before? Tim is currently modifying the converter as an overlay for *PAWS*, so that you can perform a conversion with the push of a button. I don't think I need to emphasize that this is fabulous news, because it means that after all these years the C64 will also be able to enjoy the much more advanced *PAWS* games. [...] Once we have finished restoring and editing *PI64*, we will make everything available on my website, just as we did with the 4 word parser variant of *The Quill*.

Regarding *Hibernated*; yes, it is planned as a trilogy with accompanying bonus adventures. *Hibernated 2* is planned for 2019. I can't tell you much more about it! Also people are still enjoying *Hibernated* and look forward to the bonus adventure.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Stefan Vogt 's hypersleep is rudely interrupted as his interplanetary exploration ship the Polaris-7 crash lands on an alien planet. Luckily the sands of a desert island provide a soft landing for his vessel, so he can recover five adventures from the systems of robot Io, and while away the hours and days before rescue.

Planetfall
Infocom, Commodore 64

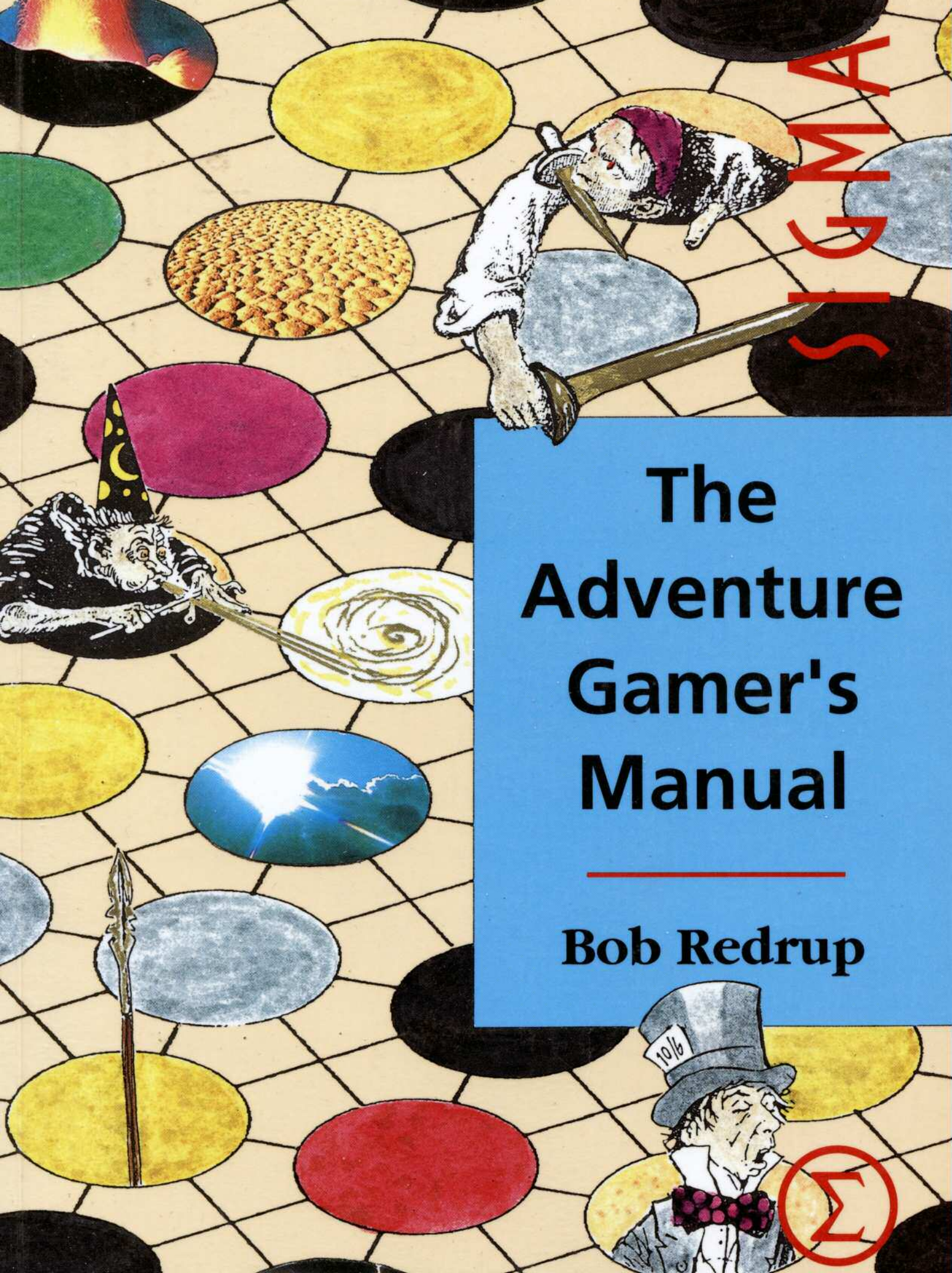*The Pawn*
Magnetic Scrolls, Commodore 64

Das Stundenglas
Software 2000, Atari ST

Fahrenheit 451
Teralium, Commodore 64

The Curse
Gilsoft, ZX Spectrum

THE ADVENTURE GAMER'S MANUAL

The Adventure Gamer's Manual is a rare thing - a comprehensive and serious adventure book that's main focus is the British adventure scene in the 1980s.

Author, Robert Redrup, a Church of England vicar "in a busy Cornish parish", was a long-time and much loved contributor to The Micro User, a magazine dedicated to Acorn's BBC Micro. Bob chose "The Mad Hatter" as his column nom de plume as his predecessor on the mag used the Adventures in Wonderland suggestive pseudonym, Alice. Bob contributed to the magazine for almost ten years (his final column appearing in March 1995), writing extensively about adventures, and filling many column inches with his infectious enthusiasm and love for Britain's Mona Lisa of videogames, *Elite*.

The manual, first published in 1992, is 156 pages long and covers the complete DNA of adventuring on various (mostly British) platforms. It starts with a detailed chapter on the history and development of games in the UK, before Bob pours his extensive knowledge of the genre into a microscopic examiniation of the design philosophy and ideas behind a myriad of adventures. Though it is written as a guide for novices to get to grips with games, Bob's intricate analysis of leading adventures and their component parts is a valuable and fascinating insight into the rights and wrongs of game design for any a wannabe creator.

It's a pleasant meander through the staple architecture of games; opening moves, puzzle construction, mazes and maps, and details how various leading games of the time implemented these features, whether good or bad. For example, he scrutinises the opening moves in *Colossal Adventure*, *Lords of Time* and *Shadowgate*, ponders one-way exits in *Red Moon* and *Zork*, inspects puzzle checks and balances in *Jinxter,* and resolves critical timings in *Dodgy Geezers*.

Each section is written in Bob's imitable and informal style, almost as if he is directly speaking to the reader from the page as he walks through each game, describing his thought processes, emotions and often contempt for games, especially those that leave him perplexed. Here's one delightful excerpt as Bob explores the "smooth warp" episode in Magnetic Scrolls' surreal *Fish!*. "A bit more head scratching produced the answer. Entering the smithy I opened the cupboard and the cage – I knew I had time to do both before anything dastardly happened – and then went outside again. Sure enough, the parrot emerged and happily flew off, leaving me free to enter the smithy again. My score now went up by 20 points and I was able to gather the goodies unmolested. [...] Impatience is the adventurer's worst enemy."

Bob ties up "loose ends" in a final chapter, extolling the communal virtues of adventuring, playing and collaborating with friends, taking part in clubs and writing to magazine and fanzines. He then discusses games that he personally has enjoyed and recommends, with the majority, understandably on the BBC or Electron. Mentions are given to *The Hunt: Search for Shauna* (Robico), *Denis Through The Drinking Glass* (Application Software Specialists), *Terrormolinos* (Melbourne House), *Hex* (Larsoft), *The Price of Magik* (Level 9), and a "slightly steamy" *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (Infocom).

The Adventure Gamer's Manual is a genre tour-de-force, from a man that had a passion for puzzles, and an understanding of what made a good adventure tick. Sadly, Bob passed away in 2000, and the book, well out of print, is incredibly difficult to find at a reasonable price, but does occasionally appear on various internet auction sites and second-hand marketplaces.

His son, Peter, has created a site dedicated to Bob's work, and has compiled a collection of Micro User scans featuring his late father's writing. He has also uploaded a good quality version of the book in PDF format that can be downloaded free of charge. Visit The Mad Hatter's website (listed left), download the book and leave a tribute to this Great British adventure aficionado.

Author: Bob Redrup
Publisher: Sigma Press
Search on: eBay / Amazon Marketplace
Website: https://themadhattercolumn.wordpress.com

FERGUS McNEILL

Inspired by a soundtrack of Bronski Beat and Marillion ("lots of Marillion") **Fergus McNeill** is the comedic genius responsible for creating a string of text adventure hits, from the lampoonery of *The Boggit* and *Bored of the Rings*, through to the serious and thought provoking *Mindfighter* for his Abstract Concepts label.

[Fergus] First of all, I should explain that all of this happened a very long time ago, and I'll probably just start making stuff up if you ask me about something I can't remember. Is that okay? Good.

Delta 4 was created whilst Fergus was at secondary school where he shared a love for computing with a group of ragtag anarchic school friends, namely Judith Child, Colin Buckett, Ian Willis, Jason Somerville, Jonathan Walker, and Andrew "Spud" Sprunt. It was the early 1980s and the influence of the BBC Micro and BBC's Computer Literacy Programme was alive and kicking.

There was a computing community at my school, but it was despite our computer studies teacher Mr Carlin rather than because of him. Very early on, I proved him wrong about a coding issue in front of the whole class; I made a lot of friends that day (and one arch-nemesis). As time went on, a group of us began to meet in the computer room to play games during our free time, and many of those people went on to be part of Delta 4.

So you had started to program other games before getting the adventuring bug?

I remember writing a Space Invaders clone and several other arcade-style games in BASIC, but they always ran a little slowly. I never really got into assembly language, so adventures were a natural step for me - something I enjoyed, and something that ran fast enough to be playable on my Spectrum!

Heavily influenced by Melbourne House's seminal The Hobbit, Fergus started to "tinker" with several BASIC adventure games, and
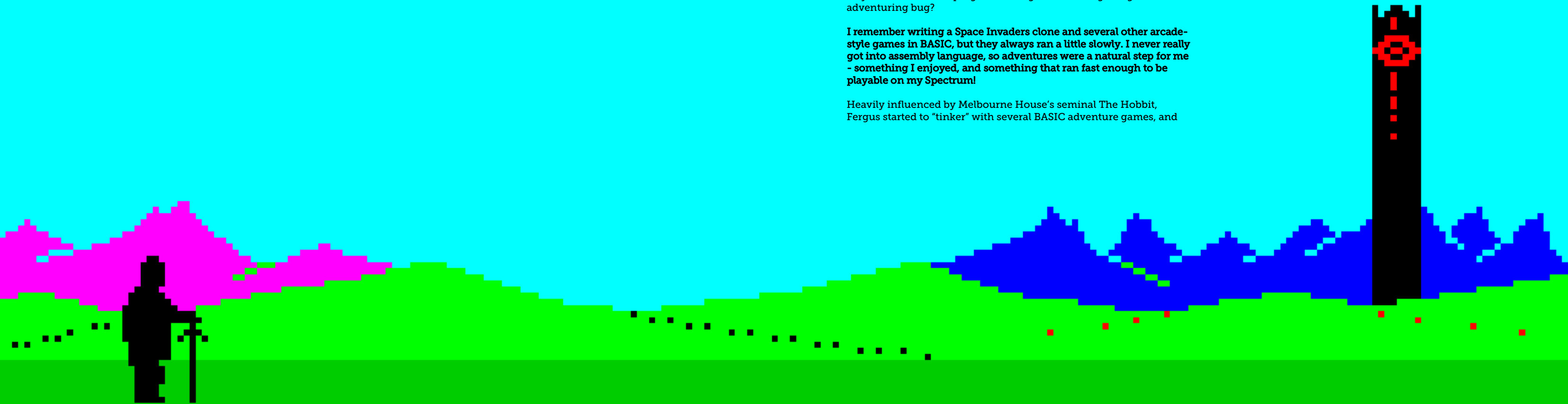
[Sherwood Forest] Delta 4's first adventure pitted you as Robin Hood on a quest to rid Nottingham of the evil Sorcerer, Guy of Gisborne and the Sheriff of Nottingham. A short, and straight-forward game with some neat ideas.
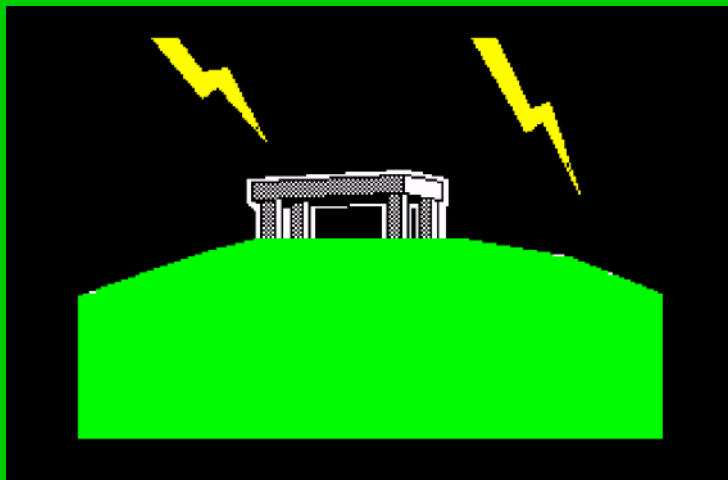
[Dragonstar Trilogy] Based loosely on Crowther and Woods' *Adventure*, the *Dragonstar Trilogy* takes players on a tale of princesses, dragons, snowy mountains and damp caves.

[Quest for the Holy Joystick] A tongue-in-cheek swipe at the games industry, it's software houses, games and personalities. With the resultant media coverage it attracted wider attention to Delta 4.

finished his first, called *Sherwood Forest*. It was written in Spectrum BASIC at the tender age of 14.

I know I'd played a couple of other adventures - *Greedy Gulch* by Phipps Associates, and *Planet Of Death* by Artic - but *The Hobbit* was definitely the game that sparked my lasting enthusiasm for the genre, as well as introducing me to the work of Tolkien. I always loved the idea of interactive stories, but *The Hobbit* gave a unique sense of a story that would truly adapt to the user, and be (slightly) different every time. I loved that, and really wanted to create something similar.

For all of its little quirks and shortcomings, [*The Hobbit*] was a huge leap forward for adventure games. It was proper interactive fiction, with non-player-characters that could move and act independently - something we hadn't really seen before. It also looked great, even on a Spectrum, with those memorable vector graphics, and proportionally-spaced text too! I didn't really think of it as a game when I was first playing it - I thought of it as a story that I could somehow take part in. The notion of exploring a rich fantasy world, where I believed that anything could happen, really drew me in.

Sherwood Forest was the first game under the Delta 4 banner and was advertised in the classified ads in the August 1984 issue of Micro Adventurer. It was a short and uncomplicated game, but a routine that trapped any attempt to hack into the game gave a first glimpse at the McNeill sense of humour. "Why did the moron press the BREAK key?" greeted anyone attempting such temerity.

In my defence, I was young and easily amused at the time.

During the development of *Sherwood Forest*, Gilsoft's *The Quill* [launched towards the end of 1983] was starting to build a considerable reputation after several enthusiastic reviews and the release of the first competent *Quill*'d adventures. McNeill was quick to see the potential of the utility, and rushed to obtain a copy.

The Quill changed everything. Gilsoft had produced a robust, well-structured tool, that truly streamlined adventure creation. It took away so much of the repetitive house-keeping required to build an adventure, and let you focus on the content creation. Yes, there was still some coding required, particularly if you had aspirations to include mobile non-player-characters, etc. But that was its beauty - it simplified things without really limiting what you could do.

The Quill being royalty-free did a huge amount for the adventure community. Other models might have worked, but removing the license issue probably encouraged people to take the risk and have a go at making something. I do think that Gilsoft were incredibly generous to take the approach they did.

In an early Retro Gamer magazine interview, Fergus told Chris Wild that "developing the early works using Spectrum BASIC was about as much fun as being punched in the face."

Sinclair BASIC had no INSTR$ function, so I had to write my own when I started looking at parsers. If I'm honest, it was probably a little bit more fun than being punched in the face, but not enough to entice me. And I do remember spending some time playing with *Graphic Adventure Creator* but I could never really get on with it. While it seemed to have some nice features, I always felt there was too much of a trade-off in terms of raw functionality and flexibility. I knew that I could do everything I wanted with *The Quill*.

The Dragonstar Trilogy followed, then *Galaxias*, a game with Kas Wellen as the central character. A space pirate of "some reputation." *Galaxias* was more of a departure in writing for Fergus, after basing *Dragonstar* on the original *Adventure*, but "without the interesting bits".

Despite my youthful mocking, I really liked the *Classic Adventure* [game]. It basically tapped into that old Dungeons & Dragons style, rather than the more "high" fantasy of writers like Tolkien, but I found it hugely enjoyable. It was also very challenge-oriented, and that's an important thing to understand if a game is going to have satisfying user-interaction - it's not just a story, it's a story where the
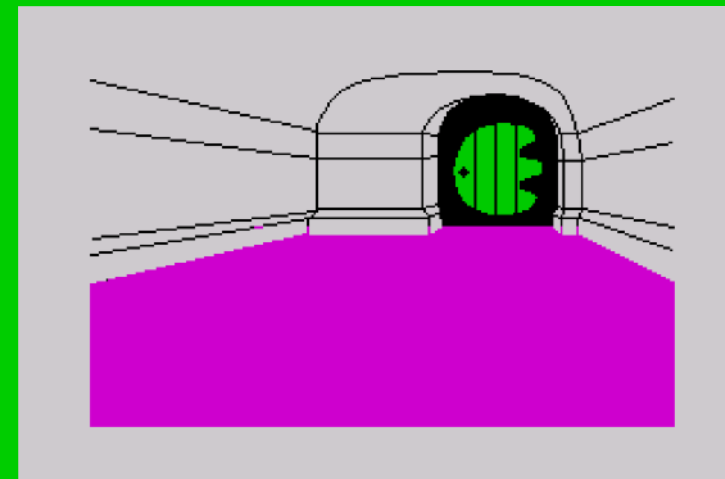
[Bored of the Rings] A massive JRR Tolkien parody in 3 parts, with six reasons to buy it: High in poly-unsaturates, harmless bonus program, fairly cheap, small, compact box, new biological formula and no bitter after-taste.

[Robin of Sherlock] A surreal combination of Adventure International's *Robin of Sherwood* and Melbourne House's *Sherlock* in a humourous romp through Sherwood Forest. An improved *Quill* offered character interactions and a much-needed RAMSAVE facility.

[The Colour of Magic] A huge 4-part adaptation of Terry Prachett's wonderful Discworld opener. The game ditched N, S, E and W and allowed the player to move Rimwards or Hubwards.

player really makes a difference and drive the narrative forward.

Things were moving quickly for Delta 4. *Sherwood*, *Dragonstar* and *Galaxias* brought the 14 year old Fergus some unwanted attention from a suspect game company hoping to make a quick buck. They offered what would have been a substantial sum of money [£500] to someone of that age, for an unscrupulous deal surrendering the rights to all of his titles, and for any that came in the next ten years.

[...] It's not quite as unsavoury as it might sound. As I recall, a person from a would-be publishing company wanted to meet me at the Superloo in Euston station, where I would graciously sign my game-development life away for a pittance. At the time, I was probably too young to appreciate just how inappropriate this was, though it did teach me a useful life-lesson that there are always people out there ready to try it on. Also, it's best not to meet strange men in a Superloo.

It's to Fergus' credit and inimitable sense of humour that the incident is brushed aside with a whim. He was soon to put that sense of mischief to good effect again, and with the help of *The Quill*, Delta 4 really began to find their feet.

The Quest for the Holy Joystick, a spoof of the software industry, started a writing collaboration with Jason Somerville - another school friend. *Quest* took the proverbial out of everything: *Jet Set Willy*, *The Hobbit*, magazine reviewer and adventure afficionado Tony Bridge, and software houses Melbourne House and Automata (their Pi-Man mascot appeared on the hand-drawn inlay artwork) were all in Fergus' sights. Tony Bridge obviously saw the funny side, and dedicated a special two-page spread to the game in the March 1985 issue of Micro Adventurer. It became Delta 4's break-through title.

I think Sunshine, who published both Popular Computing Weekly and Micro Adventurer, made a huge difference to me. I'd struggled to get any coverage - good or bad - from certain other magazines, but they were good enough to review some of my early titles and that really started the ball rolling. But please, don't hold it against them - they had no idea what would follow!

Was it deliberate to include the personalities around at the time, in a hope to gain more favourable coverage?

It started out as a sort of in-joke but it certainly helped to get more attention for the games. I can still remember sitting in the classroom at secondary school, craftily opening up the latest issue of Micro Adventurer, and whooping with excitement when I discovered that I had my first ever double-page feature in a magazine. The teacher, rather wearily, asked if I had "something I'd like to share with the rest of the class?" and I told her that I certainly did, and showed everyone the article. I'm fairly sure that including personalities from the games industry contributed to that early coverage (and helped me impress several girls in my class).

Did the press and the adventuring community take your send-up in good spirits?

There was the odd unfavourable review, and that was fair enough. Games - and humorous games in particular - are a subjective thing, after all. I think most of my resentment was directed towards the journalist who met me and then refused to even look at any of my titles, explaining to me that "You're just a kid."

Unfavourable reviews were in the minority. Home Computer Weekly said it was "an adventure to make you laugh" and ZX Computing said "an incredible game, a must for all experienced adventurers." The coverage meant that *Quest* earned a few quid - enough for Fergus to write a sequel.

Ah, but it's never been about the money. If my motivation was financial, I wouldn't have stuck with adventure games. Or started writing books!

The follow-up *Return of the Joystick*, was designed "in between selling the odd game every forty minutes" at a Microfair. As Delta 4

were penning *Quest*, Gilsoft had released *The Illustrator* add-on for *The Quill*. Though many thought graphics took away from the pure craft of a text adventure, the decision was made to add them into *Return*.

I don't agree that graphics upset the craft of text adventures, though I accept that back in the days before text-compression, there was always a difficult trade-off between spending the available memory on more game or more graphics.

While graphics didn't always add a huge amount to the user experience, they did have an important role in getting screenshots into magazines - and that was critical for any game to succeed.

Running out of available memory was always a problem, and I can recall the agony of having to delete material I'd written because it just wouldn't fit. Luckily, Gilsoft understood this, and there was a day of great celebration when they introduced text compression.

The quick adoption of *The Illustrator* showed there was a growing rapport between Fergus and Gilsoft. Some reported that he influenced the features put into subsequent revisions of the Welsh company's utility.

Gilsoft's Tim Gilberts was always a brilliant developer, who really understood how to give designers the tools they needed. We often discussed what I was doing (and how I was doing it) and I imagine that helped him to prioritise the features he added, but I certainly wouldn't want to overstate my contribution. In reality, Gilsoft came up with one great feature after another, and I sat there going "Hey! That's a really cool idea!"

Did the quality of Delta 4 games authored with *The Quill* help increase it's sales too?

You'd have to ask Gilsoft about any sales impact, but I do hope we helped them. We owed them a lot.

Undeservedly many games received a moniker of a "*Quill*'d adventure" which tarnished them in many reviewers and players eyes before they'd played the game – what did you do to make your games different?

The Quill opened up the market so that anyone could create adventures, and that was great. However, while it may have removed the technical barriers to entry, it didn't replace the need for creativity, so there's always a risk that you'll get some disappointing

---

"I do recall an extremely alcoholic evening that Keith Campbell organised, with St Brides, Infocom, Level 9, and Gilsoft... that was quite a night!"

---
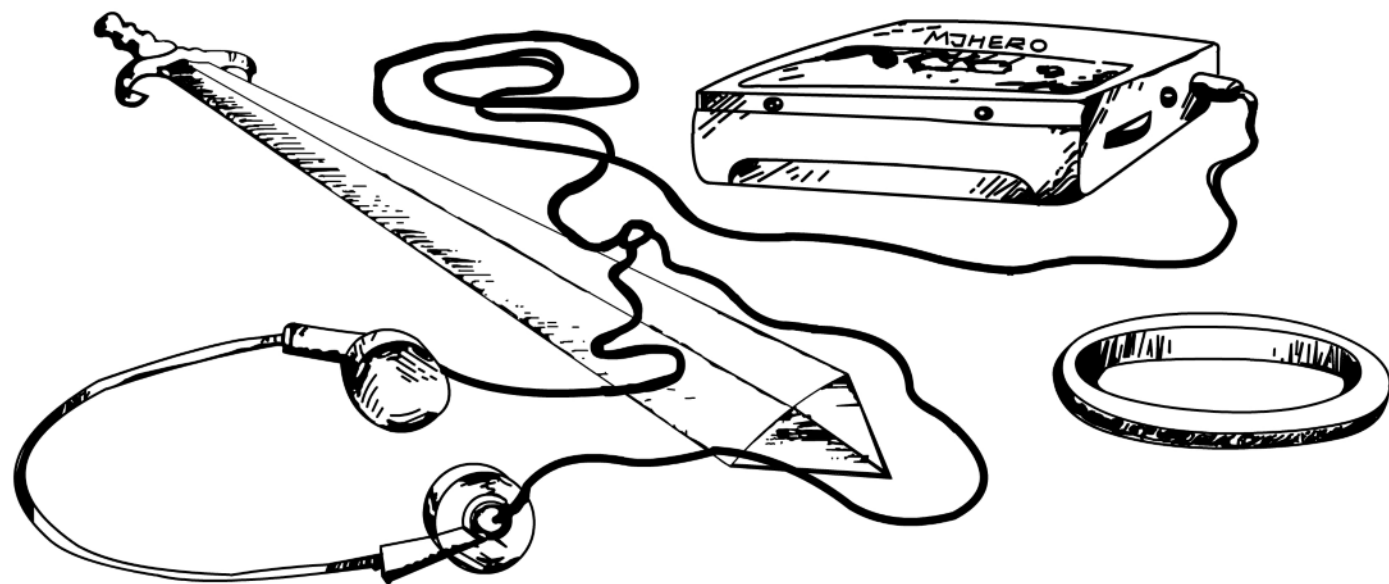
or "samey" titles. Some of my earlier games were *ahem* less than groundbreaking, but I'd like to think that I kept striving to improve. I wanted my games to be technically good, but I also wanted to tell stories and entertain people.

Hopefully, I managed to get better at that with each release.

The mainstream media coverage continued and Delta 4 interviews were starting to appear in more magazines. Sinclair User was one, and in an interview commented that with *Quest*, Fergus had "unwittingly [...] hit on the ideal way of getting media coverage without spending money". Though that was never the motivation behind the game, he was learning his trade fast.

It took a while, but I was bold and persistent (or young and foolish) and I suppose I just wore people down. After Popular Computing Weekly and Micro Adventurer started to mention the games, Sinclair User and C&VG ran some reviews, and things progressed from there. The creation of separate Adventure reviews and charts probably helped to establish the genre in many magazines that were more arcade-oriented.

Microfairs were [also] an effective way of getting visibility and, as a bedroom-developer, that was what I needed. I hand-painted a very stylish black and silver Delta 4 sign, in a futuristic typeface, which we displayed above our tiny stand. While this may not have been the sole factor in getting recognition, exhibiting certainly helped me to meet players and reviewers, and get the Delta 4 name out there.

How crucial to the adventure genre and exposure for indie writers were magazines like Micro Adventurer?

I think Micro Adventurer really helped to validate the adventure genre and give it some mainstream credibility. With so many arcade-style games competing for column inches, it was helpful to have some press that was focused on interactive fiction.

Did you find more favour with Micro Adventurer and their group of adventure enthusiasts, rather than the (usual) lone adventure columnist in magazines?

I think it depends on which lone adventure columnist we're talking about. Gordo Greatbelly from Sinclair User was always extremely kind in his comments, and we had some very generous coverage from the late Keith Campbell at C&VG and Mike Gerrard at Your Sinclair. Derek Brewster at Crash was less enthusiastic about some of the early titles, but it made the elusive Crash Smash all the more satisfying when it came. Overall, I feel the press treated Delta 4 very well.

Was it one of the reasons that you dedicated most of your work to the humour and parody?

I think interactive fiction is similar to books or any other story-driven medium - it's extremely subjective. As Tolkien himself said,

---

those things "that are to some a blemish, are all by others specially approved."

I'm sure there were some likes and dislikes among the reviewers, but I never got to know any of those people well enough to predict what they'd enjoy. It's probably for the best, though - trying to please everyone is usually a recipe for disaster. That's how you end up with those early Saturday evening shows on ITV... *shudders*

You were even welcomed into the adventure community meeting fellow authors such as Rod Pike and St Brides?

I met Anita Sinclair from Magnetic Scrolls once, but it was a morning meeting and neither of us were at our best until the coffee kicked in. And I do recall an extremely alcoholic evening that Keith Campbell organised, with St Brides, Infocom, Level 9, and Gilsoft... that was quite a night!

Despite Fergus and Judith going their separate ways in love, they both thankfully remained faithful to their Delta 4 offspring, and she became the catalyst for a game that is fondly remembered by many - *Bored of the Rings*. Fergus told Sinclair User magazine "Judith came to school with a book, Bored of the Rings. We wrote to the publishers, Harvard Lampoon, but nobody seemed to have heard of them."

That's correct. I wrote to the publishers in 1984 and still haven't had a reply. I'm going to give them another few years, then I'm moving on with my life.

He continues in the Sinclair User interview, "So we thought, we can't do the book, it's too obscene. Let's do our own. So we wrote the game, and took it round all the London mags the next day, and behold everyone loved it."

Bored was released in 1985, just before Fergus' 16th birthday. After wedging their foot firmly in the adventure big-time door with *Quest*, *Bored* and Fordo Faggins kicked it in with a hobnailed boot.

I absolutely LOVED the writing in that book, and I certainly tried to emulate their style, though I never came close to being that good. The game and the book do have some similarities - such as the title *ahem* - but they're both parodies of the same source material, so I think that was inevitable. I wish I could have used their content, but hopefully my own writing raised a few smiles.

The magazine reviews ranged from the favourable, to downright hero worship, and *Bored* was awarded a converted Sinclair User Classic.

I was in a kind of numb shock when I opened that issue. There was no warning, just the surprise of seeing the review, then staring at the page in disbelief.

It was a much needed break in order to attract the attention of a reputable publisher - one with an advertising budget and a track

record of publishing adventure games. Fergus approached Ian Ellery of CRL who responded with an expletive and told him in no uncertain terms where to go. Luckily Clement Chambers, his boss, thought otherwise and signed the game to CRL's sister label, SilverSoft.

At this point in time, why did you approach a publisher, and why CRL?

I really wanted to reach a larger audience, and I felt that I'd addressed enough padded envelopes and licked enough stamps. CRL had recently taken out magazine adverts asking for games to publish, and going with them seemed a lot more glamorous than running a mail-order business.

What were they like – and how well did they support you? They had a good catalogue of adventure games – including controversial titles from Rod Pike and others from the mysterious St Brides.

I've always got on well with Clem Chambers (we're still friends) and working with him was very enjoyable. Of course, in the early days, I was actually published by their sister-company, SilverSoft. That relationship was a little more *ahem* turbulent, but they got my games into all the High Street stores, and I learned a lot from the experience.

Bored was an ambitious game, and due to its enormity became one of the first multi-part, multi-load games created with *The Quill*.

Due to the size of the story, Bored was naturally split in three parts, but I always felt it would be good to have a more seamless* (* subject to some lengthy tape loading / saving times, of course) connection between them. I believe I was the first person to hit on the idea of saving the player's progress and inventory from one section and loading it into the next, and to make it work in a standard *Quill* game.

An adventure chart number 1, and a copious amount of copies floating around on eBay and other sites so many years later is a good indication that the game was probably your best seller?

I'm not sure of the exact numbers - providing sales figures may not have been SilverSoft's strong suit - but I think it did fairly well for them.

It's always great to see something you've created doing well in the charts. Aside from any financial considerations, there's a profound sense of validation and satisfaction in knowing that people believe in your work and are (hopefully) enjoying it.

The contract with SilverSoft meant a 15% retention deal, without an advance. Fergus even received his first royalty cheque that he and the team, erm, "invested". Cigarettes and alcohol seemed to figure prominently in his games and interviews.

Royalties weren't always as forthcoming as I might have hoped, but we certainly did our best to enjoy ourselves, and I've no regrets about that time. In the words of the late, great Vivian Stanshall, "If I had all the money I've spent on drink, I'd spend it on drink."

Did the IP lawyers ever come knocking?

No. It was a simpler time. Also, I'd like to think that Harvard Lampoon had a sense of humour, and appreciated the value of parody.

Signing for SilverSoft probably meant that any other team would alter their working practises, but not Delta 4. Before their approach to writing adventures had been somewhat chaotic and anarchic, and after the contract, it reassuringly remained exactly the same.

"Chaotic and anarchic" is probably fairly accurate. We were a group of teenagers, doing something really cool, and with enough money to keep us in vodka, cigarettes, Hula Hoops, and Cherry Coke. We had no experience and there was nobody to guide us, so we just jumped in and got things done as best we could.

After planning out the basics of the game on paper, and discussing the puzzles and gags, I'd usually develop the lead format (often on the Spectrum), and my friends would laboriously re-type everything into copies of *The Quill* running on the C64 or Amstrad. There were no schedules, and the work often stopped to play other people's games or rent videos or do the sort of things that teenagers do... I'm amazed we released as many games as we did!

Unsurprisingly a *Bored* sequel followed, and parody shots were fired over *The Hobbit's* bows. Fordo Faggin's uncle Bimbo became the star of *The Boggit*.

The Boggit was great fun to work on. As a subject for parody, it felt like coming home, and things were going well for Delta 4 at the time. Hopefully that showed in the game we produced.

The Boggit was followed by *Robin of Sherlock,* an oddball plot mix lampooning Adventure International's *Robin of Sherwood* and Melbourne House's *Sherlock*. With Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Wizard of Oz and TV's The Smurfs as comic references it was difficult to fathom and perhaps McNeill's most surreal game.

I was going to begin my answer with the words "It's always tricky to pinpoint the exact moment of conception, especially when you've been drinking..." but that could be taken the wrong way. I do remember there was a TV series called Robin Of Sherwood that was popular at the time, and I thought it might be a good subject for parody. At some point, I came up with the title (doubtless in connection with the *Sherlock* game from Melbourne House) and the idea tickled me. I think that was often the way with those things - if something made us laugh, we would go with it.

The surrealism continued onto the credits, and you called yourself The Jester, with Judith calling herself The Desperado.

Well, I was listening to a lot of Marillion at the time (and I mean a LOT of Marillion) and that can have unpredictable effects on an impressionable teenager. I would imagine.

The final game for CRL [published in 1987] was from the surreal to the straight, and a conversion of Dennis Wheatley's 1930s detective yarn, Murder Off Miami. How did Fergus find working on more serious subject matter?

It's tempting to give a glib answer, but I genuinely don't remember working on *Murder Off Miami*. At all. Some creative people have a period in their life where they get into difficulties with drink or drugs, and I suppose that was mine.

CRL produced a neat clam package for *Murder* that contained a natty clue poster, but the press reception was still lukewarm. Reviewers noted that Fergus' creative and humourous spirit had been subdued. It was a apathetic end to the publishing relationship.

It was a wrench to part ways with CRL, and I felt real guilt about it, but other publishers were starting to offer me deals with guaranteed advances. I'd dropped out of college to make games and it was generally great fun, but I really needed to start earning some money from what I was doing. I hated the situation, but I had to do something, or I simply wouldn't have been able to afford to continue.

[Right] *Bored of the Rings* and its sequel *The Boggit* both featured Delta 4 maps of JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth.

CRL's loss was Macmillan's [the London based publisher] gain, and they approached Fergus to produce a game for their new Piranha label.

I was SO fortunate with the Macmillan deal. They were all lovely people, and one of the first things they asked was whether I'd read any books that might be fun to adapt into an adventure game. I'd recently enjoyed a humorous fantasy novel called The Colour Of Magic by little-known author Terry Pratchett, so I suggested it to them. A few weeks later, I was getting off a train at Bristol Templemeads station, where Terry picked me up and drove me to a country pub for lunch. We got on really well, and discussing ideas with him was always great fun.

Terry was one of the smartest and funniest guys I've ever met, and his instinct for humour was in a different league. We made each other laugh, but he was always the hero and I was very happy to be

the sidekick. I'm just grateful to have known him and worked with him.

Fergus' next pitch to Macmillan was a parody of film noir and the works of American crime authors such as Mickey Spillane and Dashiell Hammett. They loved the idea and work started on *My Weapon Is Huge* (a parody of Spillane's novel My Gun Is Quick). That saucy working title was changed during development, and *The Big Sleaze* was released in the summer of 1987 to critical acclaim, and a gangster's trunk full of awards.

It was a landmark title, and is regarded as Fergus' finest work in the genre. How unfortunate that at the zenith of his and Delta 4's powers that *The Big Sleaze* would be their last adventure. Fergus' destiny was shifted onto a different path when he met Anna Popkess, in a tale that could have come directly from one of his games.

[Left] *Mindfighter* was lavishly packaged with a poster and a copy of the novella of the same name by Anna Popkess.

Meeting Anna certainly turned out to be a lot more important than I anticipated. She was working for an office supplies company at the time, and phoned me up to sell me a photocopier. I didn't actually need a photocopier, but she was very persuasive so I agreed to meet her.

It was a meeting of minds, and a moment of office supply serendipity resulting in them both finding their soul mate. Whether Fergus actually bought a photocopier remains unclear, however, their relationship blossomed and Anna showed Fergus the workings of a novel she was writing, called Mindfighter.

She'd been writing for some time, and the story was already well-developed. I thought it was a really interesting premise and began thinking about how it might be adapted into a game.

The subject matter was obviously completely different to what Fergus had done before, so he needed another platform and umbrella to separate any new venture from any industry preconceptions. Together with Anna, they created a new label called Abstract Concepts.

I'd been eager to do some more serious projects, and Delta 4 name was rightly associated with humorous games, so the obvious thing to do was to create a new label. We came up with the name, hoping that it would suit a broad range of different adventures. Electric Dreams / Activision wanted to publish the games, and they liked the idea of a distinct new brand, so Abstract Concepts was born.

Did Anna bring a new dimension to writing adventures? You had shared writing duties previously with Judith?

I really enjoy creative collaboration, whether it's having someone to bounce ideas off, or taking someone else's creation and developing it further. Working with Anna was a bit like working with Terry Pratchett, because although I wasn't inventing the story, I had access

to the person who was. It's great when you can have an idea, and ask "What would happen if...?" - something you can't always do in an adaptation. Anna also negotiated the deal with Activision, and proved herself a much better business-person than me!

Mindfighter is a very serious and thought provoking game. Was it aimed at a new audience, or an existing audience getting older and more mature?

I don't think it was a conscious decision to pursue a maturing audience... more that I was growing up myself. I know that I was reading a lot of new authors, and there was considerable change in the games market, and I suppose I just wanted to try some different things and see if I could do them.

The Big Sleaze had been penned using a special version of *The Quill*, but the utility was starting to show its age and didn't have the features expected of an adventure for the time. For *Mindfighter*, Anna and Fergus needed a brand new tool, so they turned to Tim Gilberts, now working on a new venture called Infinite Imaginations.

It was becoming clear that we'd need something more than *The Quill* and *The Illustrator* if we wanted our games to compete. Magnetic Scrolls had their gorgeous graphics, and Level 9's A-Code was an incredibly powerful system. So when Activision got behind the Abstract Concepts project, we knew we needed a new authoring system. Our relationship with Gilsoft, and their deep understanding of adventure tech, made them the obvious choice of partner, and they were involved from the very beginning.

The Professional Adventure Writing System (PAWS) had been available for some time, but you'd overlooked that for *The Big Sleaze* too?

I absolutely love PAWS but by that time we had commissioned Gilsoft to create our *System Without A Name*, which was essentially

PAWS+. It used most of the same logic and processing, but with a few extra features, better access and manipulation of variables.

It could feature digitised graphics that you used to great effect in Mindfighter with photos of parts of Southampton I believe? And it started to utilise icons in its interface?

I suppose the icons were a little gimmicky, but they definitely served their purpose in giving the games a more "up to date" feel. And it was great to finally move away from vector graphics, even though digitizing photographs brought its own challenges in the days before *Photoshop.* But those were just the presentation features - the real beauty of *SWAN* was in the elegance and flexibility of its coding. It was a joy to use.

The game also featured a sophisticated level of AI? Did you implement that?

Yes. I'd spoken with Magnetic Scrolls and Level 9 about what their systems could do, and I was fascinated by the notion of goal-based AI.

For example, imagine you have a non-player character who needs to go into a particular building. They navigate across the map, but encounter a closed door. So they try to OPEN the DOOR but find it's locked. At that point, they'll attempt to UNLOCK the DOOR or, if they don't have the key, they'll start moving around and searching for it. Once they find the key, they'll return to the door, unlock it, and gain entry to the building.

I wanted that sort of AI so I implemented a structure inside SWAN that would allow characters to solve problems... but only some problems. I didn't want them finishing the game before the player could!

Ultimately how did the game fare? Most reviewers seemed to want more humour from you, others, who reviewed for 16-bit magazines lambasted the 8-bit heritage of *SWAN* which seemed to inhibit the parser somewhat?

I think it did moderately well, but adventures were already starting to struggle at that point, so it probably wasn't the best time to be launching something new. I understand people expecting something more humorous, but I'd have to disagree regarding the parser - I think Tim's design was extremely powerful, so if there were any shortcomings... well, I guess that'd be on me.

Abstract Concepts ran into difficulties when an "unexpected conclusion" brought to and end their publishing support from Activision. Fergus had always planned to return to and do another Delta 4 humourous adventure, so together with Andy Routledge he worked on *The Smirking Horror*, a nod to Infocom's *The Lurking Horror*. Though the game was finished, albeit unpolished, it never saw a release.

We did complete the game, on at least one format, though it still probably needed some additional testing, and it is the last Delta 4 adventure. The original title was a nod to *The Lurking Horror* by Infocom.

The game was developed after *Mindfighter*, and made full use of the *SWAN* system. I'm not sure if we ever finished all of the graphics - SWAN used different imagery for different hardware platforms but there were definitely some in there.

Fergus made a copy of *The Smirking Horror* available on his own [now defunct] website, but has now found its way onto several adventure internet sites. It is called *Titan Find*, apparently due to "contractual reasons".

Yes! It's a long story, but the gist is that we weren't going to release the game after Activision withdrew their support for adventures. Another company then approached us about sub-licensing it, but they were contractually obliged to deliver a game called *Titan Find* to their publisher. We duly adopted that title, but for various reasons the game never made it to release.

It joined a long list of Delta 4 and Abstract Concept games that at some point or another were mentioned in interviews or the press.

Beast Enders always appears, but was really a throwaway comment within an interview?

I'm pretty sure this was a throwaway comment, though I don't remember who I threw it at. In any case, there was never any real work done on it. This is probably a good thing, as I can't bear EastEnders!

Introvoid was reviewed in early magazines, but never appeared?

It's a long time ago now, but I believe that *Galaxias* was actually just a re-release of Intravoid, with a new title and a different typeface.

Parisian Knights was another planned Abstract Concept game, and one with a very intriguing storyline about continental espionage. Your Retro Gamer interview with Chris Wild hinted that substantial work was done on this game, including the inclusion of Magnetic Scrolls-esque "stunning watercolour" graphics?

We did a fair bit of work on *Parisian Knights* - I remember we had a demo version of the first section running at one of the trade shows, and it did feature some lovely digitised watercolour images (though they weren't quite full-screen). It was a *SWAN* game but, unfortunately, this was around the same time that Activision were moving away from adventures, so the project was never completed.

A special Spectrum +3 version of *Bored of the Rings*, also destined for the ill-fated Sinclair QL. Also known as *B-B-Bored of the Remix* — was this just an expanded version of the original game?

It was to be an enhanced version of the original, but with some new material. Rather than just following Fordo and Spam, new sections would cover the rest of the Fellowship, allowing me to parody the remainder of the books. We certainly discussed using disks [on the +3], but I think Microdrives [on the QL] were generally considered too unreliable for distribution.

After the release of the second *Quest* game, you discussed a third - *The Quest for the Holy Joystick - The Search for Yaz.*

I don't remember this one getting beyond the planning stage.

A preview of *The Enchantress* from Abstract Concepts with screenshots appeared in various magazines and hinted at a more RPG-like game – how far was development of this?

This was a title we discussed with Activision, but the focus shifted to *MindFighter* and it never really went much further than some designs and mockups.

Goodnight Cruel World, another Abstract Concept game?

This was due to be the third Abstract Concepts game - a dark, sci-fi title to follow the more historical *Parisian Knights*. We did a lot of design work for this one, but sadly we never had the chance to develop it.

The Malinsay Massacre was going to be the follow-up to *Murder Off Miami* by Delta 4 and CRL?

This was another Dennis Wheatley story, and I know there was some talk of me adapting it after *Murder Off Miami*. But with the prospect

```
*** TITAN FIND ***

Interactive Friction from DELTA 4!

Argued about by Andy Routledge and
Fergus McNeill.
Typing and fiddly bits by The Jester.
Pictures of bunnies by Zippy.
Coloured pictures by somebody else.

<more>
```



```
unmoving body and shuffled after the
figure...

THE (premature) END!

And so, Harrison Cool was a stiff. The
story was over (a bit like this game
actually). The only thing left to do was
to decide whether to LOAD a saved game,
OOPS or QUIT to restart...

> _
```

of working on *The Colour Of Magic*, I moved to Piranha / Macmillan, and that was that.

Finally, Fergus planned a Star Wars parody and discussed the idea with fellow British adventurers Level 9. Called *Gross Encounters of the Worst Kind*, or *Bizarre Wars*, the game was to feature Nuke Flyswatter and a host of playable characters.

The game was to be a parody of Episode IV A New Hope and we did make some progress with the design - I think there was even a map, and details of objects and characters. The storyline was going to follow the movie pretty closely, but we definitely wanted to inject some other sci-fi references in there as well.

You'd always admired Level 9 and speculated at the potential of Delta 4's storytelling and their technology?

I always liked the Austin brothers. We'd spoken at various times over the years, and I'd been to visit them in Weston-super-Mare. I was really eager to get my hands on A-Code. Their technology was amazing - particularly their AI - and it was all the more impressive because they were the innovators who consistently did things first.

They knew I was eager to work with them, and Star Wars seemed like an obvious choice for parody, so when our schedules aligned, we tried to make it happen.

Disappointingly it didn't appear and we are left to wonder at what could have been. As part of the *Bizarre Wars* project Fergus penned a novella called Star Drawers to be given away with the game. He returned to the draft a few years later and padded it out into a fully blown novel.

After the unceremonious ending with Activision deciding to cease it's interest in publishing adventures, Fergus hung up his adventuring boots, and the remaining Abstract Concepts and Delta 4 works were shelved.

I think the games industry was increasingly focused on slick, fast-moving visuals. There's nothing wrong with that - it was the direction the hardware was going, and it was so much easier to sell. By the time I was at SCi, accompanying the sales team to meet distributors, we figured we had between 5 to 10 seconds to grab a buyer's attention. You just can't do that with a text adventure.

I do wonder if the What Now? prompt was a little harsh - it's much more intuitive to click on things, or steer a joypad, or answer multiple-choice questions. I think point and click was the natural successor to the text adventure, but I feel they're very distinct genres, with different strengths and weaknesses.

Don't get me wrong - I love point and click games - but I've never played one where I truly felt that anything might happen. Good graphics require a lot more time, money and storage space than text.

You've removed most of your links to Delta 4 now from your own website, does this signify a new chapter in your life - even though some people won't let you forget?

Most people now know me as an author, so my online presence reflects that more than my adventure heritage. But I would still like

to make a return to interactive fiction at some point, and it would be great if I could combine my experience as a game designer with my experience as a novel writer.

For adventures (or any sort of interactive fiction) to make a real impact, the genre has to reposition itself so that it can attract readers, not just gamers. There's a bigger audience out there, and if we can just figure out how to overcome the platform issues, then the future for indie developers could be very exciting indeed.

What have been your personal highs and lows of your career?

The lowest point was probably when I was working on *Murder Off Miami*, but that was my fault, not anyone else's. Luckily, there have been lots of highs - getting Runner-Up at the Golden Joystick awards for *Bored Of The Rings*, sitting in the pub and discussing DEATH with Terry Pratchett, singing Touch Me by Aha and hearing it echo round the hall while setting up for a ZX Microfair, and of course, meeting my future wife when she tried to sell me a photocopier. Yeah, it's been a pretty good career... so far.
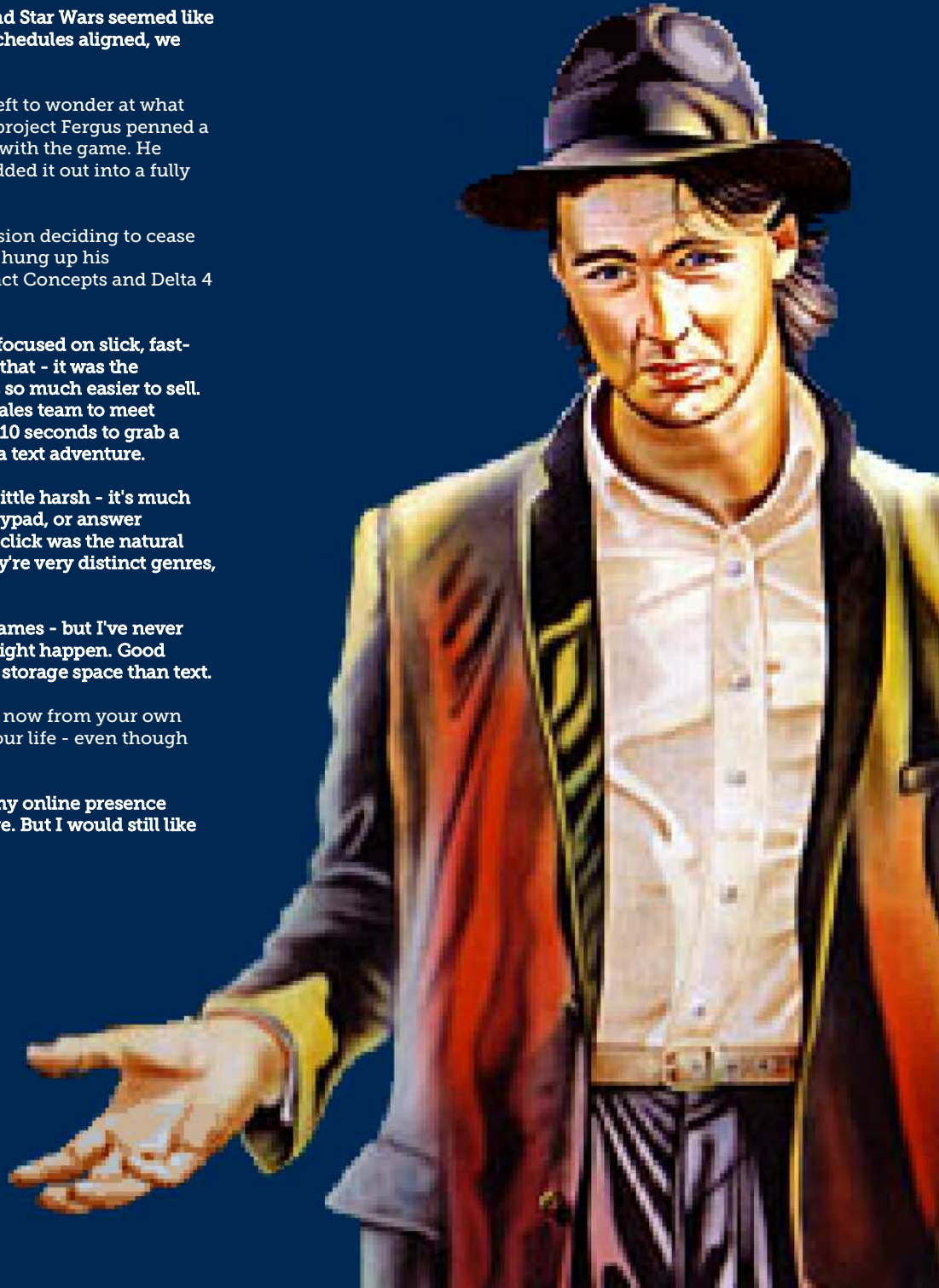
DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

HMS Delta 4 captain **Fergus McNeill** is the castaway, all alone with a single power socket and five text adventures for company.

BUREAUCRACY by Infocom, on a Commodore 128D

I always adored the sheer elegance of an Infocom-crafted adventure and, coupled with Douglas Adams' sublime comedic writing, the games they did together just had to be on my list.

THE HITCHHIKERS' GUIDE TO THE GALAXY by Infocom, on a Commodore 128D

Another collaboration between Infocom and Douglas Adams, featuring some of the most hilarious responses to incorrect puzzle solutions (remember the upper-half-of-the-room cleaning robot?). Also, the box contained a pair of Peril Sensitive Sunglasses, which might be useful on my desert island.

THE HOBBIT by Melbourne House, on the ZX Spectrum

I couldn't leave *The Hobbit* off my list. Partly, I've included it for nostalgia, but I did love the game and I think it would be fun to play it again and hear Thorin singing about gold... also, it came with a free copy of the book!

JEWELS OF DARKNESS by Level 9, on the Atari ST

I thought it would be good to go back to the beginning and include *Colossal Cave* but then I remembered that Level 9 included a version of it as part of their trilogy. With so much time on my hands, what better way could there be to experience that original *Adventure* once more?

KNIGHT ORC by Level 9, on the Atari ST

By the time this title came out, Level 9's A-code technology had become really powerful, allowing for some clever and intricate gameplay. I remember enjoying *Knight Orc* (though I never completed it) so I think this would be a good chance for me to go back and immerse myself in the work of an excellent developer at the top of their game.

TIM GILBERTS

It's not often that a piece of software changes the entire face of an industry, but in 1983 *The Quill Adventure System* created by **Tim Gilberts** and Graeme Yeandle empowered adventure writers the world over.
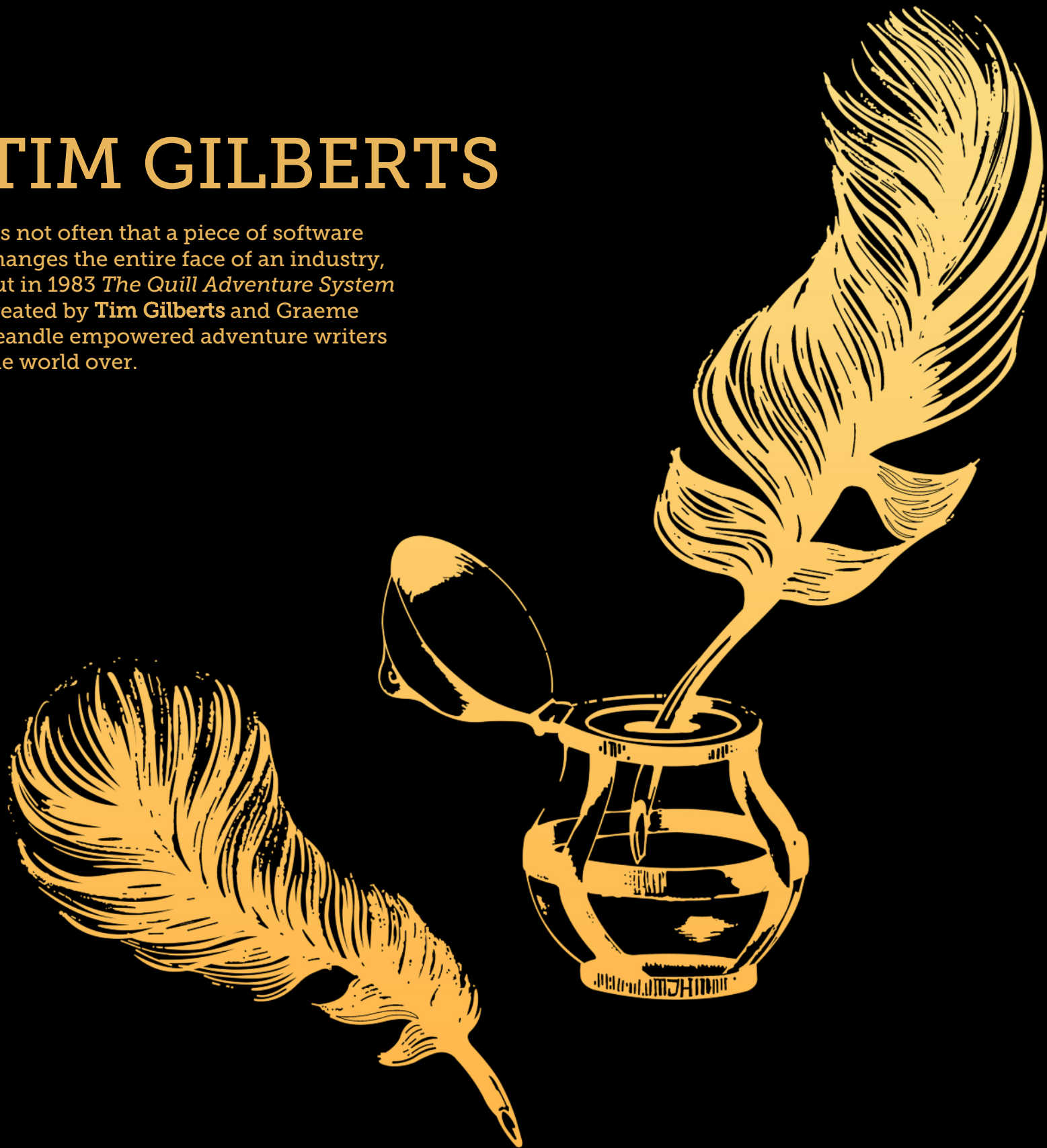
After devotedly saving for a Sinclair ZX81 machine, a young Tim Gilberts enlisted the help of his father, an electronic engineer to build it. From the moment the machine spurred into life, Howard Gilberts recognised the programming talent his son possessed, and promised to support him in pursuing a career writing software. The ZX81 was quickly replaced by the more capable ZX Spectrum and Gilsoft International was founded, backed by Howard's commercial acumen and financing, and Tim's expertise. In 1982 the first Gilsoft small ads were placed in Popular Computer Weekly and Your Computer, showcasing games such as *3D Maze of Gold*, *Munchman* and *Bear Island*.

They tried pushing their wares at one of the early Microfairs, but sales were disappointing, with Howard recalling in Gilsoft's diaries that the majority of the £1200 turnover from the day was from reselling a third-party Spectrum keyboard. Disheartening though that may have been, their forays into the software market had attracted admirers, and the fortunes of Gilsoft were to change forever when a gentleman by the name of Graeme Yeandle visited the address on the adverts in the hope of purchasing some of their game software. Yeandle told Jacob Gunness in February 2000 "I went to visit Gilsoft, as it was local, to check the quality of their software before buying any. At this time Gilsoft were operating from a teenager's bedroom but the software was well written and the teenager [Tim Gilberts] knew what he was doing."

[Tim Gilberts] [Graeme visited when] we were still in Hawthorn Road and as I remember it being a sunny day. Graeme thinks it was late 1982 after he saw the advert[s] – he also indicated he bought a copy of *3D Maze of Gold* – I didn't remember that.

Graeme had started writing adventures, building them in assembler using what the two would dub "the method". It was based upon an article by Ken Reed in the August 1980 issue of Practical Computer that described an adventure interpreter. Luckily for Howard and Tim, he'd contacted Yorkshire adventure pioneers Artic Computing about writing games for them, but was rebuked. He recalled on his website "I thought, I can write an adventure at least as good as this, and wrote to Artic offering my services. They didn't reply." The Gilberts and Graeme hit it off, and the conversation turned to programming. Graeme showed Tim his work, and they both discovered a shared interest for adventure games.

I had [...] played the Artic adventures. [...] When Graeme presented the 'method' I wondered how they were written as they seemed similar. I found a tape in my collection that says "Listing program Artic adventures". It was Graeme who had the leaning towards text adventure games, mainly because he had followed Ken's article to write some code for the Spectrum. He also had a group of friends who played D&D along with other games one evening a month which I started attending with him.

Graeme's game became *Timeline*, and using the same method started to develop a new adventure called *Magic Castle*. Tim and Graeme agreed that it was easy to create games using the approach, but making small changes to the database was time consuming. Any change to the game source meant re-assembling all of the changed elements, re-linking it with the interpreter, saving and then reloading to test the changes. It was all done using cassettes so was exceptionally laborious, prone to error and time consuming. What was needed was an editor.

[...] The conversation probably happened with my Dad at some point about how easy it was to do that even he could [do it]. That would have led onto the need to simplify anything technical and programming related, which he never got into despite his skill with electronics. That was then developed by Graeme along the lines of

31

the editor approach – I probably had some form of compiler in mind.

Both *Magic Castle* and *Timeline* became good technical demonstrations of the capabilities of what would become *The Quill Adventure System*. It wasn't a preconceived idea to develop a tool for retail, it was more a technical exercise, and an enjoyable one at that.

I do not think either Graeme or Myself believed we were destined to be great Interactive Fiction authors as such, perhaps if we had a number of creative literary types as friends we may have taken a different path. Each of our games were demonstrations of functionality although I think we made a good job of them. [...] Both Graeme and myself were interested in the coding of the systems. That was a great adventure in itself and provided entertainment. To that end I think we began to see *The Quill* as more like an assembler from HiSoft.

With that comparison came the realisation that they had a unique commercial product on their hands. No-one had publicly released an adventure-writing tool. Many had played *Adventure* and ported an interpretation of its engine onto home computers, and books from the likes of Usborne and Ducksoft were full of code snippets to help create games. The advertised *Adventure System* for the TRS-80 based upon Scott Adam's interpreter never made an appearance and other companies such as Level 9 kept their own technology close to their chest.

The Quill was such a perfect name for the utility and encapsulated the potential it offered. Tim coined it's essence in a wonderful quote "Anyone who wants to write can produce a novel without technical knowledge. You may not create great art but there's nothing to stop you trying. *The Quill* has opened up the same kind of opportunity to those who enjoy adventuring. We've tried to provide the computer equivalent of pen and paper." Early adverts show the utility was originally entitled *The Adventure Writer*, but Tim gives credit for the name change to his father.

I am sure it was my Dad's idea for the name – he was widely read not just in technical things and had a great imagination. We often had hours long chats that resulted in many of the ideas. It would also have perhaps arisen from a brief flirt with calligraphy I had before the days of computing and I think Dad and I actually made a quill pen.

It went on release in November 1983 at the premium price of £14.95. It set the industry alight, and received awards and critical accolades across the board. Micro Adventurer reported that "Once in a while, a product comes along to revolutionise the whole microcomputer scene. *The Quill* is one such, and will change the face of microcomputer adventures." Yeandle told Jacob Gunness "It sold better than I expected and in one year I got more from *The Quill* than from my day job."

It was probably an indication of the naiveties of the market and perhaps of Gilsoft themselves that *The Quill* was released as a royalty-free tool. You could freely make games and retail them without paying anything more than the purchase price to the company. It's a model that is virtually non-existant now, but at the time, early developers aimed to make their creations as beneficial as possible.

Absolutely we understood that we would be losing income if people sold games and again I think the example of popular programming tools would have driven the price bracket as compensating for that somewhat. I wrote thousands of lines of code with the Hisoft products, [and] they only ever had the retail cost – that is the way of tools. Imagine the complexity of paying a royalty with a drill?

Almost overnight it seemed the market was awash with adventures, especially those authored with Gilsoft's tool. It led to magazine writers coining the phrase "*Quill*ed" whenever a game appeared in their pages that had been written using the Welsh Wizard's utility. Gilsoft, and its adventure offspring started to dominate the press, and the company took adverts in the emerging specialist adventure media and around adventure-specific columns in mainstream magazines. It was the start of a continuing healthy relationship with

GILSOFT NEWS

TRIUMPHANT LAUNCH OF THE ILLUSTRATOR

reviewers such as Mike and Pete Gerrard and Keith Campbell.

Mike [Gerrard] arranged a night out for Adventure scene people after one PCW show which I went along to if I remember. We were always in frequent contact as regular advertisers and as a source of newsworthy announcements. [There] was a real focus for the hobby for quite a while and it seemed to indicate that text adventures as a genre could stand on their own two feet. That was a hopeful sign with the inexorable rise of the arcade games.

The cottage industry grew into a full-time enterprise and quick to grasp the commercial opportunity Gilsoft ported *The Quill* to most of the computers available in Britain at the time – The Commodore 64, Oric 1, Oric Atmos, Amstrad and BBC Micro.

The presentation of products flowed with the market demands. Gone were the early hand-drawn, pen and ink covers and in came professionally produced, and now iconic, gold quill motifs on matt black backgrounds.

Again, I think I have to credit my Dad with deciding to do something more professional – as with the other games we produced one of my school friends produced *The Quill* cover for us initially. As the sales were much higher for this new product the need to improve its shelf appeal was obvious, if it was to be stocked in shops rather than just mail order.

To further improve shelf life and appeal, Tim kept a keen eye on the competition. Level 9 were pressing ahead with unimaginable levels of text compression and growing sophistication with A-Code. Melbourne House had impacted the genre with the same hammer-blow as *The Quill* with its use of pseudo-intelligent characters, graphics and Inglish parser in *The Hobbit*. They were all influencing the ideas and concepts for new features that Gilberts and Yeandle added to the utility in a series of revisions.

The versions were mainly bug fixing although thankfully mostly minor and none that I am aware ever affected the database integrity and I am not aware of any that carried through into published games. As we produced for other markets some changes were made to allow language variation and improvements were added as we created ports to other machines.

The main drive between the A series and C series Quill on the Spectrum was to 'backport' some of the innovations that happened as other versions were produced like the ability to edit system messages or manage object attributes.

The Illustrator, coded by Tim, arrived in 1985 and was another premium priced add-on giving creators the ability to include location and other graphics within their games. It seemed a logical step, as other mainstream publishers had started to include more and more imagery in their software. Visuals it seems, became one of the driving forces behind good game sales.

I do not remember them being the specific driver but, in hindsight

Pam, Howard and Tim Gilberts manning a Gilsoft tradeshow stand.

they would have done so. Our authors would have been at a disadvantage unless we added these sorts of features.

Tim told Stefan Vogt in a 2017 interview, "I think it was just a natural progression and an obvious add on. [...] Games like *The Hobbit* had shown that graphical adventure games sold in large quantities. Graeme as a purist was not a big fan of pictures."

I think the problem is usually that those who can write do not necessarily have the ability to draw so then you tend to need a collaboration which makes the cost of entry higher. In many ways *The Illustrator* being a separate program initially, apart from the technical ability to use all memory that gave, was along the lines of expecting different people to do that.

it was released on every system with enough usable RAM to support the extra requirement. Being as efficient as possible was a major challenge for Gilsoft, as every single byte within the confines of British micros could make a difference to a game.

The Illustrator was another example of exemplar programming from Tim who used a clever approach to overwriting pieces of the utility

THE QUILL - UTILITY OF THE YEAR

Graeme Yeandle [Left] and Tim Gilberts [Right], authors of *The Quill and Illustrator Graphic Adventure System.*

One of the clearest winners of them all, **THE QUILL,** by Gilsoft, finished with exactly twice as many votes as its nearest rival - **POPULAR COMPUTING WEEKLY**.

The Quill has been voted Utility of the Year by two top home computer magazines. The readers of both 'Crash Micro' and 'Popular Computing Weekly' have overwhelmingly acclaimed The Quill as their favourite utility.

Why should this utility prove so popular? The reasons are many. The program appeals to people's creative instinct, it can be used to create a marketable product, and is easy to understand and use with a very user friendly presentation and comprehensive manual.

These and other factors have ensured the regular appearance of The Quill in the charts in direct competition with Arcade Games etc.

A product such as this is a must when it comes to stocking up. The number of people who enquire of stockists in their vicinity and where they can buy The Quill shows that people will activity seek out good software, thus ensuring a healthy sales level for the retailer stocking such items.

MANUAL MISTAKE

Graeme and Tim were meticulous in their efforts to keep their software bug-free. Unfortunately, in 2010, after 20+ years someone spotted a mistake in one of the manuals. Tim recalls, "CHANCE 10 is meant to succeed 10% of the time, so the manual should say 'succeeds if percent is greater than or equal to a random number,' so who knows if a game out there gives too much or too little Gold away....."

in and out of memory as required (he later refined this technology to implement overlays in *PAWS*). For it's execution, instead of memory consuming bitmap pictures, he devised a small set of commands that could be used over and over again for line drawing, plotting, and shapes filled with patterns or colour.

All the art packages I had were screen based. Obviously, the concept was there in ZX Basic and visually in games like *The Hobbit*. I also distinctly remember watching one of my art friends drawing just a number of simple lines that created a picture. Having an editor to draw the pictures seemed natural to me. Obviously, one would have been written in house for the development of *The Hobbit* I assume.

Artist Terry Greer who had been commissioned to draw striking inlays for some of Gilsoft's older artwork produced a wonderful adaptation of the original *Quill* artwork for *The Illustrator*. Captivating several classic adventuring scenes within the feathers, it was another touch that underlined the high standard of quality that Gilsoft set.

It was an amazing job - I always thought how great it was that it reflected the original and yet illustrated (pun intended) the change to colour and visual arts with the picture filled quill.

With such a successful product, there was little surprise that rival developers would see an opportunity to make a quick buck. Up until 1985 Gilsoft had a virtual monopoly on the market, but competition attempted to muscle in on their territory. Tartan released the *Adventure Building System*, and Dream Software released *The Dungeon Builder*, but both were poor relations to *The Quill*. It was perhaps Sean Ellis and his *Graphic Adventure Creator* [GAC] published by Incentive Software that posed the biggest threat. It spurned on Gilsoft to accelerate development, and further revisions and three additional standalone products were developed to keep ahead of rivals. *The Press*, *The Patch* and *Characters* were all added to what Gilsoft now branded *The Quill and The Illustrator Graphic Adventure Writing System*.

The Patch, developed by Phil Wade and released in 1985, sold for a more modest £5.99 at launch. It added further sophistication to the drawing system, and extended the adventure interpreter with basic sounds and a RAMSAVE and LOAD facility – a feature that modern adventure systems and games were making commonplace. *The Press*, again contributed by Wade, but for a smaller retail price, improved on the text compression algorithms of the original product and included many of the facilities offered by the earlier *The Patch*. Finally *Characters* was the last add-on, by Kevin Madocs that allowed easy editing of the font character sets that games used. The suite was as sophisticated and capable as was possible for machines with up to 64K of RAM. Versions began shipping across Europe, with a strong following in Spain and Scandinavia.

We provided printouts of the messages or cut down sections of assembler and then the licensee provided translated. We then assembled the final product. The only one that was not done by us was the French one which CodeWriter then used as a European grey import against our licensing conditions.

CodeWriter had been trusted with US distribution and packaged both *The Quill and Illustrator* [modified to use disks] together as *The Adventure Writer*. The product failed to gain traction, resulting in poor sales. It was a surprise given the apparent appetite for adventures in a country dominated by Adventure International and Infocom games. Adventure blog author Jimmy Maher laid the blame on the US outfit, "Codewriter who lacked the resources to make it known and widely distributed in that more intimidating and elitist marketplace."

We did hold high hopes of a similar success over there especially with the ubiquity of disk drives and the fact that Codewriter added the ability to load pictures from disk. [...] I am not sure we ever saw any actual cash despite my parents flying over to 'have a chat' with them.

The next "natural progression" for Tim was to amalgamate each of the individual elements of *The Quill and Illustrator Graphic*

Adventure Writing System into a single product. It was an opportunity to unify the strengths of each one, and with GAC proving a worthy adversary, a chance to build more features and make another leap forward ahead of the competition. *The Professional Adventure Writing System* or *PAWS*, took around a year to develop, released at the end of 1986. It premiered a new, advanced parser that went beyond verb/noun recognition and supported the emerging 128K machines – some with disk drive support as standard.

You had some erosion of free space (about 7K) for the 48K machines which was the strength of *The Quill*. Also, the Commodore 64 seemed to be growing a disk following which would allow the overlay system to be implemented. Although [*PAWS*] was supported on tape you can see it was really to leverage the Microdrive, DISCiPLE and OPUS [drives].

The decision to include graphics and implement a new parser split the Gilsoft team. Tim supported both, whilst Graeme was reticent, telling Jacob Gunness in an interview "time was running out for text adventures. *PAWS*' parser was good but a lot of people don't want to know the difference between an adverb and a preposition."

I think he felt that you did not need [graphics] - after all who worries about illustrations missing in a novel – I know some great children's books had them though. VERB NOUN made the game less confusing as you did not need to search for exact the phrase which some early *PAWS* games and commercial games required to their detriment.

The parser complications affected both player and developer. Whereas *PAWS* simplified routines that were laborious in *The Quill*, such as GETing and DROPing objects, it made basic commands more difficult to support as they could be programmed [and thus typed by the player] in many different ways.

Use of that complexity needed to be subtle. The custom four-word parser version of *The Quill* we did for some software houses was a precursor and really addressed the main need for adjectives to allow multiple objects like coloured keys to be handled in a simpler fashion. Long strings of complex commands are often a gimmick unless used consistently.

PAWS was released late in the commercial life of text adventures, and wasn't as successful as *The Quill*. Mainstream developers such as Melbourne House were still using *The Quill* to good effect, and many indie developers also kept faith with the simpler product. Planned conversions were never released.

It was always intended to produce a *PAWS* for the C64 as the next best-selling platform but, somehow other things took over and it was never completed before the market started to slump.

Since starting Gilsoft, Tim had nurtured a successful software consulting business called Infinite Imaginations. It was this company that he contracted to Gilsoft to provide programming support. He also offered his unique insider knowledge to adventure companies such as Delta 4, St. Brides and CRL and converted many of their Spectrum-based *Quill*ed games to other platforms.

Most of the work was done by phone and mail or in meetings at CRL's offices. I met Ms Scarlett [St Bride's patriarch Marianne] and one of the other 'girls' possibly Priscilla, in their Victorian gowns and veils at CRL's offices [and a] computer fair [...] which a lot of people from the Adventure community arranged, including Mike Gerrard and Fergus McNeil for example. They were very enthusiastic about the adventure games and [were] 'in character'.

Gilsoft had a strong and beneficial working relationship with Fergus and Delta 4. Fergus was a positive exponent of *The Quill*, building the majority of his adventure catalogue with the tool. He'd formed a new label, Abstract Concepts, in order to write more serious games apart from the Delta 4 moniker. He'd used the 4-word parser for *The Big Sleaze*, but passed on using *PAWS* because he needed something that could take advantage of the new 16-bit Amiga and ST machines.

[Fergus] was a larger than life character, very erudite and fun. He

[Above] *The Illustrator* ZX Spectrum artwork by pixel wizard Matej Jan, based upon the inlay by Terry Greer.

stayed at the house at least once as he had shipped his Mirage synth down so that we could look at digital music production. I remember him getting up in the morning and lighting an unfiltered Camel with some comment like "that's something to cough for!" - probably wearing a Marillion tee-shirt.

Abstract Concepts commissioned Infinite Imaginations and work began on a Super-*PAWS*. Tim based the new product existing code written for a 68000 based version of *PAWS*, derived from *The Quill* for the QL and the Amstrad CPM compiler. They named the new mega system, *The System Without A Name*, or *SWAN*.

It was more to support Delta 4 in any way they wanted for a monthly fee if I remember – there was no final specification as such just an initial wish list and then a series of organic developments as the games needed things. It was a collection of pieces of code that could be strung together by any competent coder – a lot of effort was put into the graphical capabilities and icon based control system across all platforms. The standard compiler was extended to support new features so that Fergus could have a useful develop and test environment on the Atari if I remember.

The first [and sadly only] adventure Abstract Concept released using *SWAN* was called *Mindfighter*. It was a gritty story about a psychic boy whose life is overtaken by a series of traumatic events. It was a departure for both writer and developer. It showcased the first use of

bitmapped graphics, read from a disk drive. There were others too.

Some of the key functions were how the Icons were fully flexible systems of triggered events and the Graphics were all bitmap, rather than drawstring, so there was a large range of wipes and fades available. There were also lots of custom CondActs if I remember and some forms of LOOP functions.

Infinite Imaginations were also hired by the Spanish company Aventuras AD, a remnant of Dinamic Software, to work on a tailor-made, in-house parser. Led by Andrés Samudio it resulted in another confusing acronym, *Diseñador de Aventuras AD* [*DAAD*] or *The Adventure Designer*.

Andres had his own ideas on the way to take it forward including proper symbol handling. The compiler was PC based from Graeme's port of the *PAWS* rather than Atari, although I think we did [...] leverage the *SWAN* work. They were a great bunch to work with and some really talented graphics and coding guys and some very thorough testers. It was a real blast for me to live and work in a foreign country. Although there were always people in and out of the office at Gilsoft the part time nature of it for many meant it was often only me programming on-site until late into the night – mainly as I lived in the flat above as well. In Spain there was always a mix of people around you could bounce ideas off. [The Spanish adventure scene] was very similar, [but] a year or two behind the UK with a mix

[Above] To showcase the capabilities of *The Professional Adventure Writing System*, Dicon Peeke created a short adventure called *Tewk* that came bundle with the utility. There are only five locations in the game, but it is fun, well designed, and uses clever graphics routines and the sophisticated parser to good effect. Peeke, a freelance artist from Tewksbury [hence the title], did other sample graphics used on the *PAWS* box for adventures that do not exist ["yet" - Tim].

of bedroom coders and large companies forming. The quality of graphics on everything always seemed higher as well!

SWAN and *Mindfighter* marked the beginning of the end for GIlsoft in Britain, but a vibrant adventure community continued well beyond the end of the company. Publishers and authors such as John Wilson of Zenobi and Larry Horsfield of FSF Adventures continued to use Gilsoft tools well beyond the end of the Spectrum's commercial life.

I have to say once I returned from Spain I took a job in Local Government and really had little to do with the home computing scene getting into the emerging internet and the growth of Linux. It is only in the last few years I have rediscovered the retro and retro adventure scene and had the time to really spend on it.

With Gilsoft and Tim riding into the Spanish sunset, the question remained about the decision to allow royalty-free distribution of adventures created with *The Quill* and *PAWS*. Would their finances and longevity been different had they adopted a licencing model?

Piracy was rife [and] I am not convinced the sales levels of games would have generated as much revenue for the work involved in collecting and admin. [....] In actual fact the major losses came from things like the CodeWriter tie-up.

Both *DAAD* and *SWAN* were never commercially released into the public domain, and both lacked the polish and user friendliness that a marketable product needed. For the modern adventure community there was hope of a new *PAWS*, after Tim announced that the Spectrum Next computer would be receiving a brand-new edition.

There will be two versions actually. When the Next was first announced it was ESXDOS based so I bought a few of those devices and began development of a version of the old *PAWS* that could use

these devices. That will now be released as it is, to allow people to use *PAWS* on real Spectrums with modern SD interfaces. The work that Garry [Lancaster] has done on NextOS means that I'm experimenting with full integration with the extended BASIC to handle the new features and the extra memory. [It] will allow the editor to have some of the features the ST version would have had, including labels for flags and a few things I don't have working yet. At the moment both are [backwards compatible] to a A17C *PAWS* [database] although I have had to break compatibility with PTM and other add-ons.

Adventure is the *Pac-man* or *Space Invaders* of text adventures, but without *The Quill* the landscape of the British and European games industry would have been different, more corporate, less creative and colourful. Can we imagine not having Denis and his Drinking Glass, Boggits, or The Balrog being trapped Behind Closed Doors? No, so thanks Tim, Howard and family, and to Graeme for the Gilsoft legacy.

I think, as in many areas of life, a great deal was due to luck and a congruence of factors – that we lived close to Graeme for example. It is also decisive moments like Dad agreeing to fund a Spectrum and my character in getting absorbed totally in a topic so that I can become good at it. My Mum and Dad's hardworking attitude played a big part - doing something like that part time (my Dad) takes real dedication.

It is very fulfilling to see so many people getting fun from stuff I have done I love seeing the mentions and the discussions. I have said elsewhere it is our little bit of eternal life. At my Dad's funeral I said he will live forever in the memes that he has helped create, which includes this period of history which is being recorded and sifted now for significance with the benefit of hindsight.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Tim Gilberts' Spanish Galleon runs aground after a daring raid on a waterfront text adventure warehouse in London. Salvaging just five games from his sinking hold, he wades ashore ....

Suspended on C64 disk – Because I love science fiction, [and] the physical product is very appealing. It was the first disk based [game] I bought which felt like computers at home were catching up with my expectations. It held the promise of a lot of depth as it did not have to fit in memory – I also liked the control of multiple entities angle.

The Hobbit on Spectrum – Just because I remember to this day how amazed I was with the combined effect of the game, graphics and individual characters. It also allows you to replay it, and like Solitaire is sometimes not solvable.

Hibernated on C64 tape – I did play some of it in the beta test and I would love to complete what is a labour of love from Stefan, who got me into retro archaeology and computing. I deleted the word 'back' from before retro... confusing isn't it?

Colossal Cave on an Alpha Micro – Because it started it all, and I have never played the original Fortran [version].

Diamond Trail on a Dragon 32 – Because I hope I get to finish the conversion one day.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

In August 1984 **Gilsoft** published the *Gold Collection*, eight adventures brought together under the Welsh Wizard's own banner, all authored using the golden nib of *The Quill Adventure Writing System*.
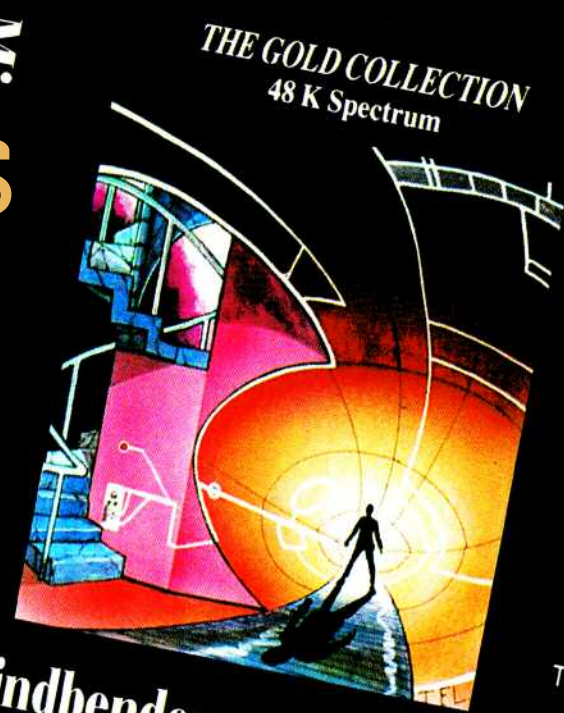
During the development of *The Quill*, Tim Gilberts and Graeme Yeandle had created *Diamond Trail* and *Timeline* in order to evolve the features and capabilities of the adventure programming "method" Graeme had written.

Gilsoft published the resultant games using the original framework in 1983. Yeandle continued to write, creating *The Magic Castle*, a classic fairytale yarn that built upon the better and more streamlined techniques that were being delivered as *The Quill* matured into a commercial product.

With *Trail* and *Castle*, Gilsoft had two commercially competent games. Howard Gilberts and son Tim realised that publishing games made with their own tool was beneficial on two fronts. Firstly, there was the financial gain of having a successful commercial product, and secondly, technically competent and creative titles would enhance the reputation of the utility they had been authored with, thus increasing the demand for *The Quill*.

It wouldn't be too long before third-party games authored with *The Quill* started dropping through the letterbox at Gilsoft towers. It was a case of sifting through each, and selecting a set of titles good enough to be sold under the Gilsoft name. In addition to *Castle* and *Trail*, six other titles *Africa Gardens*, *The Adventures of Barsak the Dwarf*, *Mindbender*, *The Curse*, *Spyplane*, and *Devil's Island* were deemed good enough to join the two elder statesmen. They were packaged as individual releases under the *Gold Collection* moniker, and given distinctive, gold livery packaging featuring artwork by Terry Greer.

[Tim Gilberts] I think including *Diamond Trail* and *Magic Castle* would have been more about moving them into the corporate

[Magic Castle] Graeme Yeandle's original adventure follows the well trodden rescue-a-princess-from-a-magic-castle path with a few surprises along the way - from exploding footballs to nasty garden gnomes. It's not the greatest game, but is a good indication of how the original "method" could construct a decent tale.

[Devil's Island] In *Devil's Island* you start trapped in a cell where escape pitches you into a deadly tropical forest that surrounds the jail. It's a short, but ingenious adventure from Colin Smith, one that has a vivid Huw Jones loading screen depicting the titular island.

[The Adventures of Barsak The Dwarf] A traditional fantasy tale of dwarves and their love for gold. Nine treasures have disappeared and it's up to broadsword-wielding Barsak to search an ancient castle to find them. Unfortunately feels a little like a series filler.

[The Curse] Ill-fortune crosses your path when a fortune teller with a magic globe transports you into a fantasy world of forests, wolves and Egyptian mythology. Your quest is to return to your own reality. *Curse* is another straight-forward game, with good prose, logical puzzles and has a neat and colourful display.

[Diamond Trail] With a loading screen that looks as if it was created using Vu 3D, Tim Gilberts' Diamond Trail pokes fun at Sir Clive, requiring the player to "restore" the missing Sinclive [snigger] Diamond, that has been stolen from Spectraisi's capital city.

[Mindbender] The Mindbender machine is a computer-controlled device that has fallen into the hands of a guerilla group who plan to use it by brainwashing the population. Your job, in this well written, humorous and thrilling game is to find and destroy the machine.

look we were developing, so again they had new artwork from Terry. I have to say although Terry's is excellent and in the style of the others I do still like the original covers by Steve Harbron [a school friend of Tim's] – they have a unique style and reflect the start of peoples careers.

You'd published your own arcade games originally. When you launched The Quill had you envisaged publishing games from other authors?

We had always indicated an interest in selling games in the manual and asked to see them. The main problem was managing authors expectations I think as they all assumed they would get rich!

You had Graeme's "method", and then *The Quill* for implementing a game, but what was your own approach to designing and writing an adventure?

When I designed *Diamond Trail*, if I remember correctly, I started with an outline of any puzzle arcs or unusual elements – e.g. the Train. Then I laid out a map and wrote some descriptions and links to allow movement around the world. Then obviously onto coding
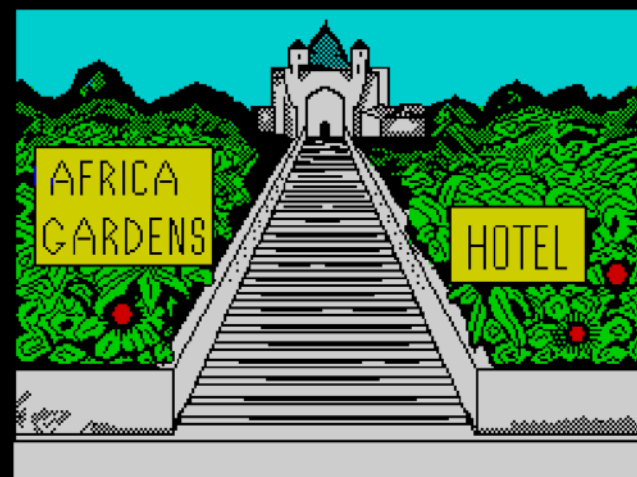
[Africa Gardens] Tom Davies' supernatural tale has you trapped in a Hotel California-esque mansion with creaking doors, and cobwebbed rooms. It's superbly written with plenty of atmospheric prose. A good candidate for a *PAWS* remake featuring the hotel guests as pseudo-intelligent characters. One of the *Gold Collection* that does glitter.

[Spyplane] In *Spyplane* you're stuck in the claustrophobic confines of an aircraft cockpit, collecting as much information [with commands such as RECORD and LISTEN] on an enemy's military capabilities by using the onboard equipment and navigating around a provided map. It's a hugely inventive and original adventure] from David Brammer, and a standout title in the *Gold Collection*.

the puzzles and the responses for things in the world.
When submissions started arriving at Gilsoft, you created an evaluation sheet that helped you determine the commercial viability of a game - what did the sheet contain?

The sheet looked at originality, [use of] facilities, implementation, debugging, spelling and grammar. We always asked for crib sheets and a full solution [so] documentation [was important]. [... Plus] it always needed to promote *The Quill* of course. I think that pretty much sums up what you need to do to make a good adventure especially if you realise that "facilities" implies clever puzzles and experience for the player.

I would say though, that as you play you need to look at each location with an eye for what someone reading for the first time would see and therefore try. I always hated locations that hinted at amazing things that you could not interact with even in a limited sense.

They were a mixed bag – from the sublime *Mindbender*, ambitious and quirky *Spyplane*, to the run-of-the-mill *Magic Castle*. Was it a case of getting a good collection together and releasing them, rather than one or two titles?

Yes, it was always seen as the start of the best of the rest of what we had been sent. [...] In the end they also had to prove that *The Quill* was a capable tool. *Magic Castle* was Graeme's demonstration of *The Quill* really so as a first game with the system perhaps we can cut it some slack.

Do you have a favourite in the collection?

I think my memories are a little tarnished as I would only ever have played them using the crib sheets and solutions to quickly evaluate them – I think you lose a lot then. [I remember] *Spyplane* – just because it was so different. I think Terry's picture was great as [it was] different to the other ones in the series.

Originally released at the reasonable price of £5.95, the games were then reduced in price in very short space of time. Was this price shift an indication that the market was becoming saturated? You didn't publish any further games from that point onwards.

I think this was a recognition that text-only was a limited market and in general budget titles were the way to get increase sales. The lack of further titles in the *Gold Collection* must have just been down to disappointing sales probably as artwork and full colour inlays came with a capital investment cost.

We of course [did] continue publishing titles at full price with *The Hollow* and *Madcap Manor* following after, which as they added illustrations were seen as perhaps having a wider appeal than text only.

Terry Greer provided some in-game and title screen artwork [Huw Jones for the others] for the games – was this your first time to work together? How did the relationship start?

I am not sure if he did do any of the title screens (correct me if I am wrong) – I thought they had all been done by Huw Jones or possibly one or two by one of the other "school friend" artists we used. I think he was recommended to us by one of the distributors or contacts that Dad had built in the industry but I cannot be certain.

He also went onto produce the lovely *Illustrator* artwork for you – just how good an artist was he – and what impact would good artwork both in game and on the cover have?

He was an amazing artist who could capture the essence of the storyline summary/title and could produce consistent good quality on time and without being extortionate.

His artwork certainly ensured our software got shelf space and looked good in advertising and reviews.
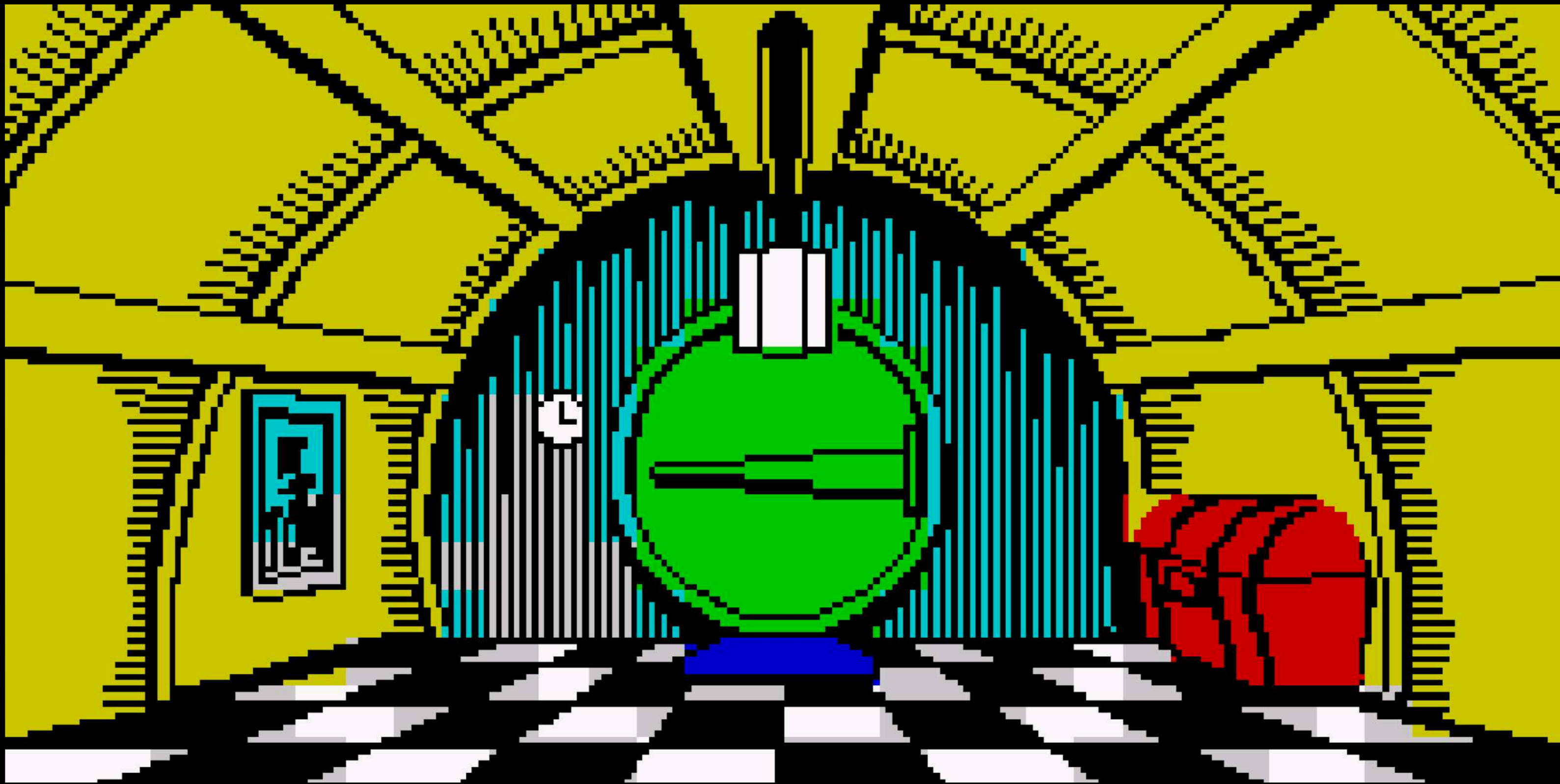
THE HOBBIT

THE HOBBIT 128K

The Classic Adventurer leaves its comfortable Hobbit-hole and goes in search of a community powered 21st century re-working of Veronika Megler and Philip Mitchell's legendary adventure.

Melbourne House's 1982 classic *The Hobbit*, developed by Philip Mitchell and Veronika Megler was a watershed moment for adventure games. It washed away its simplistic verb/noun and non-graphics predecessors, and set the standards upon which all subsequent games would be judged. It featured a range of sophisticated attributes; an advanced parser dubbed INGLISH, interaction between characters called ANIMTALK and the introduction of non-playable, pseudo-intelligent characters, or ANIMACTION.

There was no limit to its authors' ambition or imagination, apart for

Format: ZX Spectrum
Developer: World of Spectrum Community
Original Publisher: Melbourne House
Loading Screen: Mick Farrow
Release Date: 2015

[Above] Ported from the Commodore 64 disk version of *The Hobbit*, this sumptuous new picture is one of the best additions to the enhanced 128K game.

the strait-jacket of the technology that was available at the time. Working from their Australian base, Megler and Mitchell were hindered from the start, having a meagre 32K of RAM to utilise in their TRS-80 development machines. Across the ocean, their US contemporaries, Infocom, were already releasing complex games, unbound by the restrictions of RAM. They had the luxury of knowing that most home machines had access to random-access floppy-disk based storage mediums and could use it to store and load data and graphics at will.

For *The Hobbit*, its target European market tied to the archaic

cassette, the interpreter, parser, data and graphics all had to fit within RAM and a single load. It wasn't towards the end of the 80s when the Amiga 500 and Atari ST gained traction that disks in British households became commonplace. Unfortunately, by that time Melbourne House in the UK was on the brink of being sold to Mastertronic and had deserted the adventure market. We were never to have the opportunity to return to the Wilderlands in an enhanced format ..... until now.

In March 2014, ZX Spectrum revival artist Mick Farrow created a brand new loading screen for *The Hobbit*, based upon the original

packaging artwork. It became the catalyst for debate on The World of Spectrum [WoS] forums questioning how a version of the game could look with updated graphics. Discussion focused on using the extra available RAM in the Spectrum 128K machine combined with instant loading from an emulator file. A forum member called Einar Saukas picked up on the idea, commenting that "decompressing a stored screen will be much faster than the original drawing routine, so the game would play better. Hacking the original code shouldn't be hard, and removing the original drawing stuff should provide plenty of space for hacking." It seemed like a great idea. The plot, line and fill routine of the original game was painfully slow, often
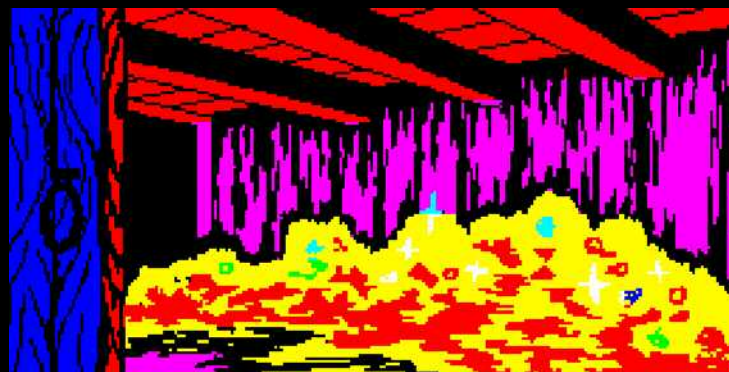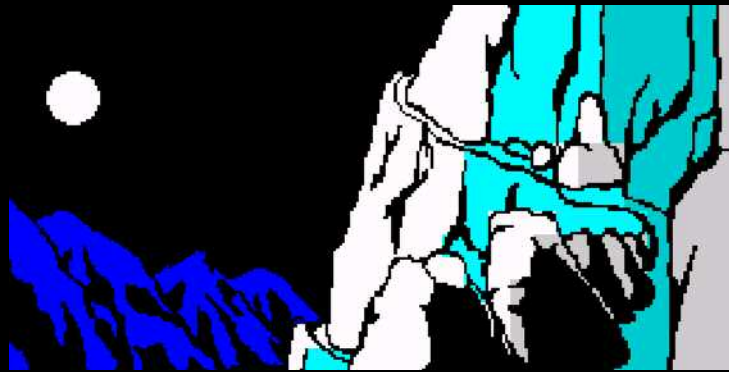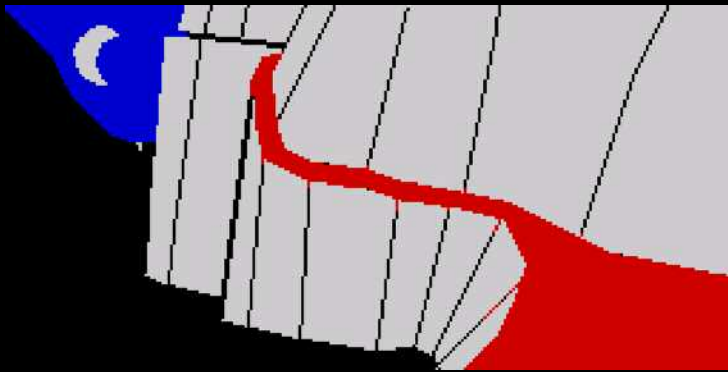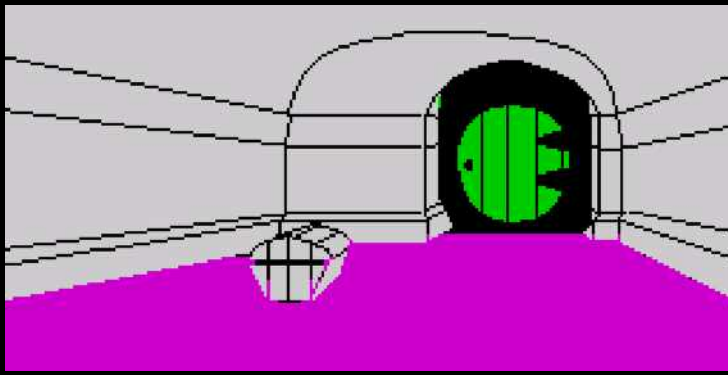
[Left] A comparison between the original graphics from the 48K version [Left column] and the community enhanced images in the 128K version [Right column].

[Above] A jubilant crowd toasts the success of Bilbo as he returns Smaug's treasure to the chest in Bag End.

distracting from the gameplay as you waited an age to enter the next command.

Einar seemed to make a start, but after a flurry of initial activity, the development seemed to fade. Then, in May 2015 another member called Kayamon posted a finished version of the enhanced game on the WoS forum that seemed to build on the original idea from Saukas. He wasn't impressed and complained that it had been undertaken without his consent being considered. Kayamon responded "I got tired of all the quibbling over tiny details in the development thread, and decided the only way this thing was going to get done was if someone just dived in and got on with it."

The squabbling continued, with Saukas eventually publishing his own beta in June of 2016 for all to play, including the source code for reference. For all intents and purposes the project had been in hiatus for several months, but was fairly complete. Saukas even obtained Veronika Megler's blessing under condition that it was available free of charge, clearly stating it was an independent revision not produced by Beam, and provided reference to the original version. In the end, despite the in-fighting, the enhanced game was well received; "Kayamon should be congratulated on releasing a slick looking finished product", "this looks great - *The Hobbit* is my favourite adventure game and this version does it proud" and "Holy crap! This looks incredible!" were just some of the thoughts of grateful forum players.

So, what about the game itself? Even after the "enhancement" it still plays like the original version. There's no change to the functionality, text or character behaviour, though a forum thread suggests that some effort was made to do so. Expect the same loveable bugs and infuriating parser of the 48K game, complete with the charm and sufferance of those chaotic NPCs that makes it so memorable.

Over 50 location graphics are now in the game, all instantly drawn bitmaps, ported from the DOS, C64 and BBC Micro versions. They've been Speccy-fied, having their resolutions and colour schemes changed to match Sir Clive's oddball display. Perhaps the best element of the 128K version has been the addition of just three screens. The loading screen, with its colourful rendition of Smaug, and tribute to the original authors by Farrow is superb. The opening hobbit-hole graphic, from the C64 disk version is fittingly detailed and beautifully ported, and the final game over screen, that used to be a text-only affair, has now been replaced by a joyous cheering crowd, with a silhouette of Bilbo and companions raised aloft in triumph.

It's arguable whether the extra graphics add anything of substance to an already brilliant game. The images range in quality, and the colour palette chosen in many is a little hit and miss. The lack of a delay in drawing is welcome though, and if you miss the plot and fill line drawings, you can always revert back to the original version by loading the emulator in 48K mode if desired. *The Hobbit 128K* is still a cracking game, and kudos must be given to the WoS community for trying to create something special. It is as close to an enhanced version we'll get until someone re-writes it, or pens a brand new adventure.

Make sure you grab a copy if you've never played it before, or if you have, still grab a copy and take a look. In my opinion, if you really want the pizazz of better graphics I'd recommend hunting down a copy of the C64 disk, DOS, or Apple II versions. If you want a version with some ultra-stylised black and white graphics, then go for the classic Apple Mac version.

THE BIG SLEAZE

Fergus McNeill posts his feet to desk duty, lights his last lucky and recalls New York in the 1930s, Spillade Investigations and the mysterious case of the Maltese Bullfinch.

In 1987 Fergus McNeill was at the height of his adventuring powers, riding on the successful wave of commercial hits such as *Bored of the Rings*, *The Boggit* and *The Colour of Magic*. Hailed as a comic genius by many in the industry, his shine was slightly tarnished with the release of run-of-the-mill detective yarn *Murder Off Miami* for CRL. McNeill, soon bounced back, and returned to more comfortable comedic grounds with a hit parody of the detective film noir, *The Big Sleaze*.

Though Murder Off Miami wasn't up to the standard of what had come before it, had it given you a taste of writing something away from the fantasy worlds of previous adventures?

[Fergus] I was more attracted to the genre by watching old detective films like The Maltese Falcon and, of course, Steve Martin's awesome comedy Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid.

I hadn't read a lot of detective fiction before *The Big Sleaze* but, once Macmillan got behind the idea, I did immerse myself in the relevant books and movies, to get a better feel for them and to pick up the tone of the writing. The working title of the game was actually *My Weapon Is Huge* (a parody of Mickey Spillane's novel My Gun Is Quick) but fortunately I was persuaded to change that to *The Big Sleaze* (a homage to The Big Sleep).

You were very experienced with producing adventures for the commercial market at this point. With those years under your belt was creating something with *The Quill* second nature by this point?

Starting work on The Big Sleaze was different to the games I'd developed previously. Yes, I was more experienced, and I had learned more about *The Quill*, but a detective story was always going to centre on a case that had to be solved, rather than a quest. I also knew it would have to take place in a city, and cities aren't as suited to a linear narrative as quests - you can steer the player to visit places in a particular order, but it's difficult to restrict their movement if

51

[Left] *The Big Sleaze* reception area on [top to bottom] the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC464. Instead of manually re-entering the Spectrum data into *The Quill* on each of the other platforms, McNeill enlisted the help of Gilsoft themselves for a quick conversion.

they want to go backwards.

I started out with a general idea of the story, then began to sketch out the principle locations and develop a map. It felt natural for a private eye to use his car to get around, so the map became a series of grouped locations, connected by car journeys. Once I had settled on this structure, it became a lot easier to fit the narrative and puzzles around it.

Did you have plenty of Chandler and Hammett books to hand when writing – did you look to those for words, phrases and feel for the time?

Yes. I read detective novels and watched the films throughout the project. By nature, I've always been a bit of a mimic, so I found this is a useful way to maintain the appropriate tone. I still do something similar today, when writing novels.

Were there any storylines or areas that you explored but dropped? I wondered how the story evolved over time when you were writing? Perhaps "my weapon is huge" relates to a more sexualised story?

Most of the Delta 4 games were driven by parody, so a lot of ideas started with a joke, or something familiar that could be made fun of. With *The Big Sleaze*, I wanted it to be a mash-up of different clichés from the detective genre, but I also wanted to anchor the narrative with elements from one particular story (in this case, The Maltese Falcon).

I don't remember dropping any major storylines, but the way I work is more about keeping ideas fluid until they fit and then writing, rather than writing speculatively. As for the "huge weapon", that was just a gag - I knew it was important to keep people laughing, so I always tried to pack as many jokes in as I could, even if they were just an off-colour snigger.

You designed some of *The Big Sleaze's* locations by using big paper maps of New York City? Had you been to the city before – did any particular location stand out for you?

I'd never been to New York, so I bought a selection of maps and guidebooks (this was back in the days before the internet, after all) and really tried to "learn" the city. I think that creative ideas flow more easily if you understand the background setting. That's another habit that I've carried over to my writing career, and I find that doing location research can be a great source of inspiration.

That background knowledge meant that McNeill could add a sublime touch of humour to the way Spillade navigated around a city he was supposed to be familiar with. He would often take "short-cuts" that added hours to a short journey. These actions would drive someone with a topographical knowledge of New York crazy.

Tony Bridge when reviewing the game in Sinclair User seemed to miss the joke completely. "Delta 4's New York doesn't coincide too closely with the real world. Who would get to Queens, about a mile to the east of New York, via Jersey City, some 15 miles to the south-west?" Who indeed, but only Sam Spallade?

I've always believed that it was worth dropping in little things like that, even if they weren't immediately obvious. Someone will pick up on them at some point!

Most of your games by this time had become multi-part adventures. From a writer and designers point of view how difficult did this make things - especially in a city with a car, as you highlighted, that could journey back and forth?

Due to the way *The Big Sleaze* was structured, with groups of locations connected by car journeys, it wasn't too much of a problem. Saving and loading the player's progress meant that I could maintain the consistency of things, though it did mean that planning had to be careful - you couldn't simply add an object (and all the associated text messages and use cases) towards the end, without considering how a player might try and use that object if they returned to an earlier section of the game. But this was a small issue, compared to all the extra storage space I had for the story, with multiple parts and text compression.

From a players point of view, a multi-load was a monotonous if somewhat expected experience of playing games on 8-bit machines. The subject matter had started to overtake the capabilities and capacities of 48K machines. Did you ever consider 128K versions only?

I would love to have designed a game that wasn't constrained by the
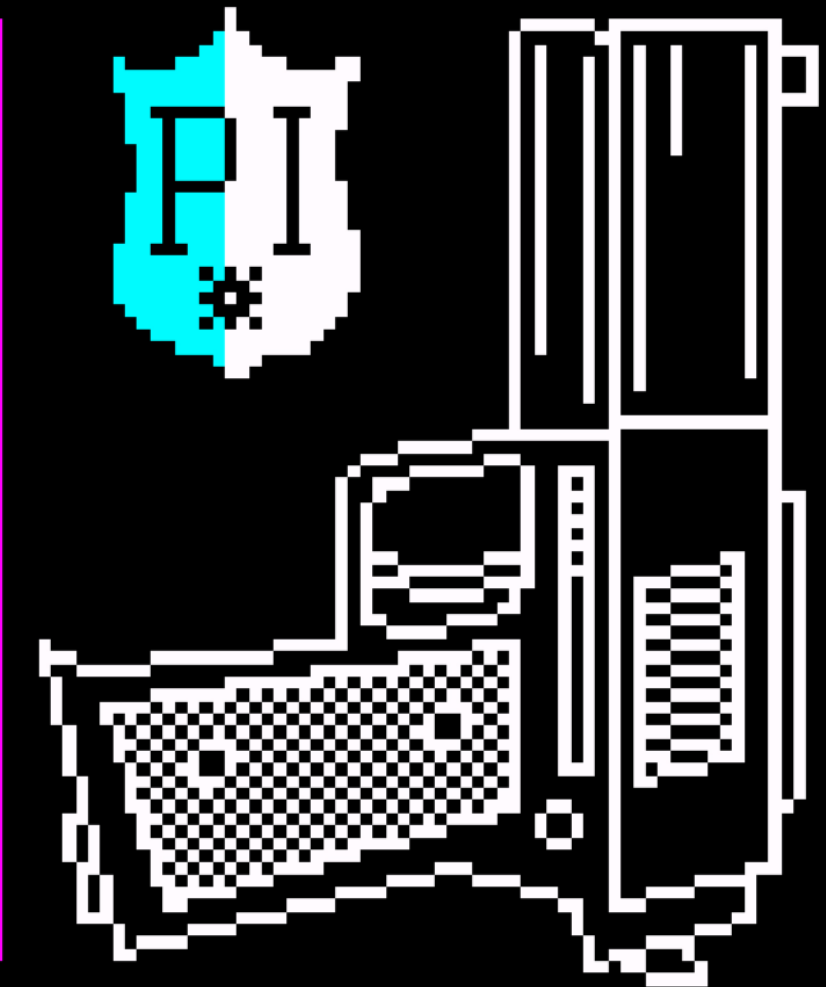
smaller memory machines, but in order to reach the widest audience it was important to support the most popular platforms. When I think how little space we had to play with, it's hard to believe, but I think that's true of all game genres, not just adventures.

The Big Sleaze's climatic scenes took place in and around Central Manhattan. After buying a model aeroplane and finding The Maltese Bullfinch in the most unlikely of places, Spillade takes the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building and has to recuse the dame from the clutches of King Kong. It was perhaps the only dose of trademark McNeill surrealism that was in the game.

Unlike the games that came before it, *The Big Sleaze* was a parody of a whole genre rather than of one particular story. I was still very inexperienced and probably didn't appreciate how to shape narrative arc - hopefully I'm a little better at delivering satisfying endings now.

It also contained a few examples of "instant death", killing off the player without giving him advance warnings. Leaving the office door open for the local hoodlums to boobytrap was one example.

I used to do that far too often, and my older/wiser self would certainly give the player some warning when there was danger ahead. It's only fair, after all. I suppose the invention of RAMSAVE and OOPS commands did make sudden deaths more bearable. And hopefully, if I killed players unfairly, I at least did it in an entertaining way!

McNeill's maturity with *The Quill* did shine with the smartness, and clarity of presentation. The top half of the screen showed a small, high quality picture, alongside a neat rendition of a PI badge and gun. How important was a clean interface and good character set and font style?

I'm glad you asked that! In a text adventure, where almost the whole user experience is words on a screen, the typeface is very important. I never liked the default Spectrum font (unless is was proportionally spaced, like in *The Hobbit*) and the C64 and Amstrad were both a little ugly in places.

The BBC Micro probably had the most pleasing typeface, but I think a custom character set can add some atmosphere to a game. As long as it was readable, of course!

The game's graphics were also of a good standard [*I think that's a very generous way of describing them - Fergus*] though in downtown Manhattan a packet of Chewit sweets appeared as one of the skyline's skyscrapers.

At the time there was a TV advert for Chewits, featuring a stop-motion monster called The Muncher. In the advert, he ate the Taj Mahal, the leaning tower of Pisa, and the Empire State building. For some reason, that notion stuck with me and I made one of the skyscrapers into a giant packet of Chewits. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Is that amongst one of the things you may have changed looking back?

I always wanted to include more back-and-forth dialogue in the game, so that Sam could have more interesting conversations with other characters, but talking to NPCs was always tricky with the limitations of the text parser we had. As I recall, Gilsoft provided us with a special version of The Quill which allowed 4-word input, rather than the standard verb+noun, but I always felt that this area of the game could have been so much better if it was written using PAWS.

What plans did you have for NPCs – some of the early previews also mention the new use of NPCs? How would they have affected the puzzles and story? Was it a limitation of memory of tools that you had to live with?

I always wanted NPCs to be able to move through the game-world and interact with it, but there was only so much that you could do with *The Quill*. Interestingly, it wasn't so much about the available memory (although that was always tight) - the principal issues were the lack of PROCESS tables (which Gilsoft addressed in *PAWS*), coupled with the need for a lot more variables to keep track of things.

What are your most favourite elements to the game?

I really, really enjoyed writing in a Chandler-esque style. After years of medieval fantasy settings (albeit fantasy with a comedic twist) the

[Left] *Not content with parodying a single genre, Fergus McNeill's The Big Sleaze poked fun at many other celluloid titles from the 1930s Hollywood catalogue.*

chance to do something different was like a breath of fresh air.

Have you been back and played it?

No. Whenever I look at my old games, I always feel an overwhelming desire to start editing things and making changes, and life's way too short to get into that.

It also had the usual responses to swear words, and to entries such as FERGUS and the like – including a KISS VELMA and others. Were these always something that you added at the end of a game?

I usually added those little Easter eggs when I was bored or lacking ideas for the main game. They were a bit of fun for me, though I did have one unfortunate issue (with *Robin Of Sherlock*, I think) where I was told that the buyer from Boots really didn't approve of bad language. Without thinking it through, I replaced the existing Easter eggs with a rather drastic system reset for anyone typing anything rude into the game, even mild things like FART or BREAK WIND. This wouldn't have been so much of a problem if there hadn't been a window in the game and when players typed BREAK WINDOW... well, *The Quill's* parser truncated all words to their first 4 letters, so there were a few accidental resets. Still, I learned a valuable lesson about the importance of testing so, y'know, silver linings and all that...

Throughout the game there were subtle hits that Spillade and Velma had a thing for each other?

I'm a romantic at heart, so I do like a little chemistry between my characters. But ultimately, I think that classic private detectives need to be a bit lonely... and love can be a bumpy road when mysterious dames keep making offers you can't refuse.

On *The Big Sleaze's* release the critics loved it. Keith Campbell in Computer & Video Games said "I rate it as Fergus' best to date", while Derek Brewster [awarding the game a coverted Crash Smash] said "Fergus McNeill has excelled himself with this one". Tony Bridge was the only snitch in the gangsters mob, and failed to see the funny side of *Sleaze*, awarding it a paltry 6 out of 10. He reflected on Fergus as "a pretty resilient chap and capable of great things, however [this] isn't one of them."

Thankfully it was another big success, and one that won more awards than any other game for Fergus and Delta 4.

It was certainly well-received, which was actually quite a relief. Secretly, I'd been very nervous about doing something so different, but thankfully the reviewers liked it.

Several reviewers also said it was one of your easier games (I completed it so it must have been). Was this on purpose – or more the game's slant towards narrative over puzzles?

I suppose there was more of a focus on the narrative, but also I was trying to be more fair to the players by making the puzzles less *ahem* obscure.

The game was ported to the Amstrad and Commodore 64 which both had versions of *The Quill* available to Delta 4. Interestingly with *The Big Sleaze*, the team didn't meticulously transfer the Spectrum code and database across to the other versions by hand. In this instance they sought the expertise of Tim Gilberts at Gilsoft, the creators of *The Quill* who helped in the transfer.

Yes. Retyping a multi-part Quill game into a different machine was even less enjoyable than you'd imagine, unless you imagine doing it surrounded by schoolchildren all playing the recorder at you. Thank goodness for Gilsoft!

The game found new audiences with a budget release by Alternative Software, and via later re-publishings with Zenobi (who authored a disk-based version) and GI Games.

The Big Sleaze seemed to strike a chord with people who'd been less impressed by the Tolkien parodies, but it also appealed to the existing Delta 4 audience, so that was the best possible outcome for me. Actually, getting a movie deal or winning the lottery would have been the best possible outcome, but this was still pretty good.

Are you surprised there's still a great deal of love for the game?

I'm absolutely amazed at the interest in my old games, though I'm also very glad to know that people enjoyed them and remember them fondly. Looking back at them now, I agonise about how restricted they were by the available hardware, and how much more I wish I could have done with them. To put that in context: when I write a novel, it's typically 100,000 words long. I doubt that I came close to that total with all the Delta 4 games combined.

Will Spillade ever officially return to the mean streets of New York?

I definitely want to return to interactive fiction at some point. And while there were no plans for a *Big Sleaze* sequel, it would be fun to write something humorous again, particularly if it involved characters like Spillade and Velma. I suppose the main consideration is whether it would be commercially viable... I guess I'll watch and see how much interest there is in a rumoured Big Sleaze homage ...
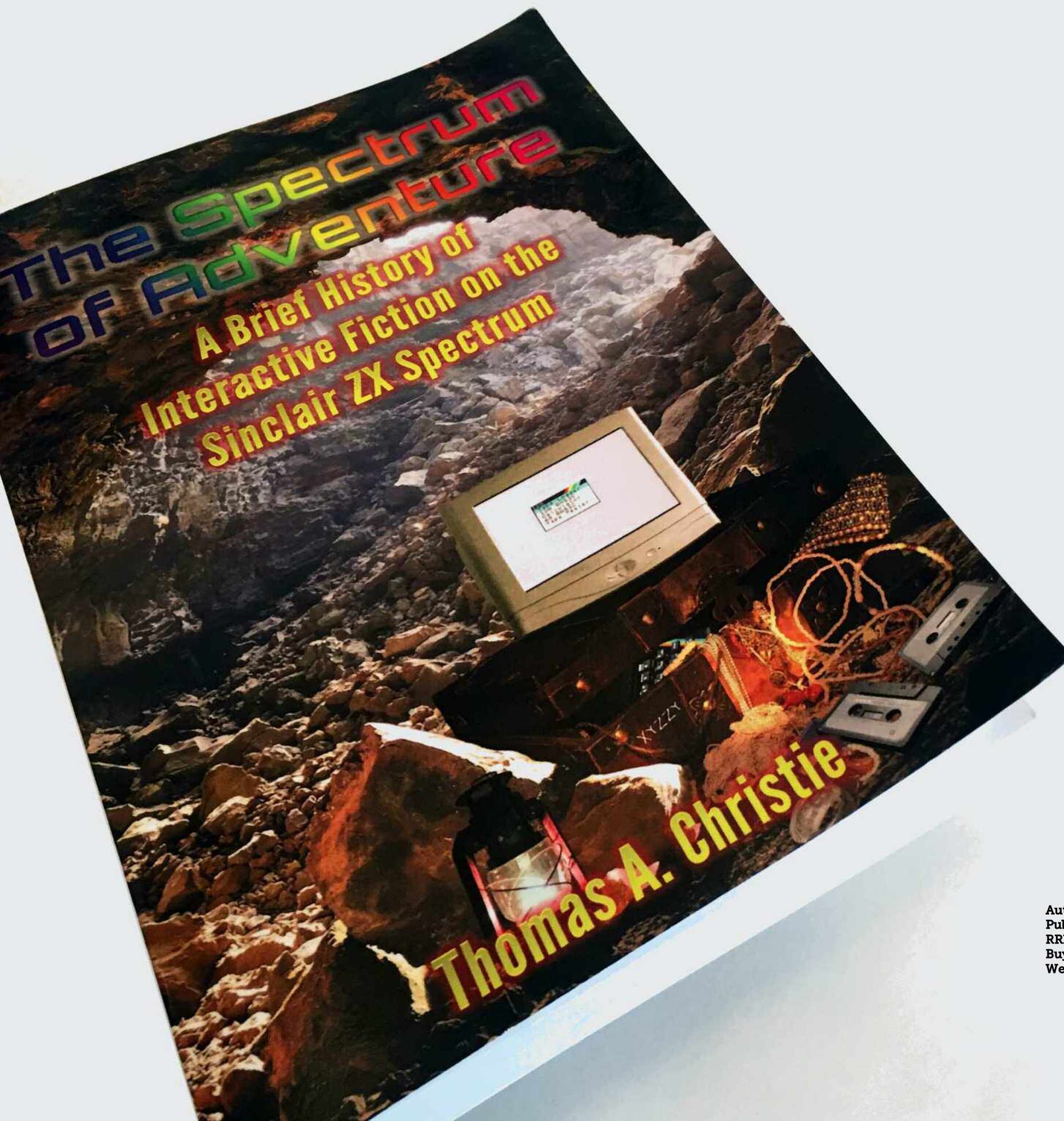
THE SPECTRUM OF ADVENTURE

They say never judge a book by it's cover, and for **The Spectrum of Adventure** by Thomas A. Christie there's never a truer adage spoken.

Let's get the cover out of the way shall we? If you saw this book on a shelf you wouldn't think it was a Spectrum book, then again I'm not sure you'd think it was a book about adventure games either. It has a very 90s photo-collage feel to it, more suitable to a pulp love story from the time, about a man, a girl and their adventures on the information super-highway. But fear not, EXAMINE COVER CAREFULLY and beyond the cave and the PC monitor showing a Spectrum 128K menu, there's a few pieces of gold, the obligatory lamp, and treasure chest stamped with the magic word XYZZY. OPEN CHEST and, at last, the corner of a very small Spectrum! It's an opening puzzle worthy of any adventure game!

But, let's put that to one side and look at what counts, what's inside the book! According to the blurb *The Spectrum of Adventure* chronicles the evolution of the text adventure on the ZX Spectrum, exploring the work of landmark software houses such as Melbourne House Software, Level 9 Computing, Delta 4 Software, the CRL Group, Magnetic Scrolls, and many others besides. And it does a terrific job of it. To say the book is comprehensive is an understatement. Christie covers 100 games from *Adventure I* to *Fish!*, including the majority of mainstream games, and some indie gems from Zenobi, Tartan and 8th Day - as long as they were commercial titles. No homebrew stuff here.

The book runs to 601 pages, starting at the Spectrum's launch in 1982, through until the end of the decade. That means Christie dedicates between 5-7 pages to each of the games, with plenty of background information, discussion of gameplay and an evaluation on the impact the game had on the industry at the time.

The reviews are very workmanlike, functional and reflect the author's professional literacy heritage, rather than an avid text adventure fan pouring their passion onto the page. Because of that, some may find it a little soulless, but here and there smatterings of humour do poke through and on the odd occasion we do get a sense of personality and biased opinion.

There's a useful section of further reading at the back, and two indexes - one alphabetic and the other in chronological order which is usually something that's missing from other books. The book follows the chronological order, which makes sense - you get a feeling of how both the industry and the genre in terms of storytelling and technology evolve.

All in all, it's a vital and enjoyable resource. Alongside the familiar you're bound to find titles you've never played, and Christie's words will make you want to hunt them down. Highly recommended.

Author: Thomas A. Christie
Publisher: Extremis Publishing
RRP: £16.99
Buy it from: Amazon
Website: http://www.tomchristiebooks.co.uk

THOMAS A. CHRISTIE

Thomas A. Christie grew up through the pop culture of the 80s, on a diet of music, TV shows and ZX Spectrum text adventures. Writing a book on the genre was a logical step, having misspent his youth writing hints and tips for adventures and sending them into the magazines of the time.

The book is very unbiased, you don't show your specific love or dislike of specific titles - were you required to sit on the fence at all times?

First of all, you're right that I do generally tend towards quite rigid neutrality in the book, as I was always conscious of the fact that the games I had personally liked and admired may well be right at the bottom of somebody else's list! That being said, I've always been really enthusiastic about the text adventure in general, so there always seemed to be something of interest to discuss about every game I was looking at - whether it was an unusual central concept, or a really offbeat approach. That's what I always loved about the Spectrum - no matter how restrictive the limitations of the hardware may seem today, there were so many incredibly inventive games out there that always seemed to stretch the technology to its limit.

Why did you choose text adventures as the book genre?

If there's one word that has always typified the Sinclair Spectrum for me, it's ambition. Even today, I find it incredible to think about what programmers were able to cram into 48Kb of RAM back then. But it was also a system that has rightly become known for its inventiveness, and text adventure games - it seemed to me - were capable of doing the near-impossible, which was to create complex virtual worlds on 1980s hardware that, at their best, seemed completely believable and absorbing. Because they were reliant on

> "...there were so many incredibly inventive games out there [for the ZX Spectrum] that always seemed to stretch the technology to its limit."

prose rather than graphics, they had an advantage in that they could paint a picture of the most outlandish environments in surprisingly effective ways which seemed to transcend the restrictions of the home computer technology of the time.

Because interactive storytelling has always been an interest of mine, and as I had always fondly remembered the 8-bit scene of the eighties for its creativity and ingenuity, I felt that writing a book would be a good way of exploring what it was about the Spectrum's thriving text adventure output that had made it so popular with gamers, while simultaneously paying tribute to the pioneering innovators of the time.

You limited the number of adventures to 100, which games did you choose to leave out?

This was easily the biggest challenge behind writing the book: deciding which games to include, and which to leave out. There were well in excess of 2000 text adventure games written for the Spectrum back in its heyday, so I think it's fair to say that there was a danger I could probably have just kept going and going. But when I

was putting the book together, I soon found that it wasn't so much a case of pinpointing which games were the most significant, but rather trying to find which titles were especially indicative of the particular trends that were emerging at the time. Some of these games weren't considered stone cold classics by any means - in fact, some were downright obscure - but they were still noteworthy for one reason or another.

The idea to have 100 games in total came quite early in the process, as did setting the chronological range of the book between 1982-89, but even then I was acutely conscious of the fact that somebody out there would probably be unhappy that their personal favourite didn't get a mention. I hope that I managed to cover most of the memorable titles that will strike a chord with Spectrum owners of the time, though.

How long did the book take to put together?

Because I had played so many text adventures back in the day, I suppose you could make a case for saying that the background research had been going on since the eighties! But in terms of the actual writing process, the book took just over a year to put together. This included time to play the games, take a look at contemporary magazine reviews, and consider how each title fitted into the broader framework of the games industry at the time.

As one of the purposes of the book was to consider how the genre had developed over the years, I did my best to write the chapters more or less in chronological order, though even in the later stages I found that it became necessary to include certain additional games which, of course, meant that others had to be dropped from the line-up. So it was a process of careful compromise right up until the book was finished.

Did you play every single title?

Many of the games I had encountered back in the eighties and, while remembering them fondly, I hadn't played them in decades - meaning that a serious refresher course was in order! Others I had played on later platforms, such as the Magnetic Scrolls games which I had first seen on the Commodore Amiga in the early nineties, so it was a case of looking at the Spectrum versions and seeing how much variation there was and how the playing experience differed as a result.

Sometimes I had heard of a game but hadn't actually played it, meaning that I was coming to it anew, whereas some titles were a complete mystery to me. However, in every case I did my best to approach each game with the same level of enthusiasm, and there was certainly no shortage of sub-genres on the Spectrum - fantasy, sci-fi, detective drama, historical mystery, parodies... it had them all in abundance. But it's fair to say that I spent longer with some games than with others; can you imagine how much subtlety and nuance you would miss if you were playing through a Delta 4 or St Bride's School game as a "speedrun", working from a solution and never deviating from it? I found it amazing how many of these titles had retained so much richness and atmosphere, even after so many years had passed.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

The Spectrum of Adventure author **Thomas Christie** finds himself washed ashore with just 5 text adventures to pass the time ...

1. The Very Big Cave Adventure (CRL/St Bride's, 1986)
This will always be, hands down, my favourite text adventure game of all time. It's a no-holds-barred parody of Crowther and Woods's seminal *Colossal Cave Adventure*, and it hits its mark faultlessly - sending up just about every aspect of the original source material, but doing it with enough affection that it doesn't leave its target in a crumpled heap by the end. The literary allusions come thick and fast, from John Wyndham to Lewis Carroll by way of H.P. Lovecraft - often cropping up in the least expected of places. But it's the game's relentlessly serrated wit that keeps me coming back to it.

2. The Big Sleaze (Piranha/Delta 4, 1987)
Fergus McNeill was always one of the best-known names in the 8-bit text adventure world, and *The Big Sleaze* was arguably his masterpiece. His trademark wit was never more sophisticated than in this lovingly-crafted satire of hard-boiled 1930s detective fiction. With an expansive game world split over three parts and some well-considered puzzles, the drollness of the game's humour never entirely overshadows its surprising sense of urban atmosphere. The Spectrum had no shortage of detective mysteries in its time, but rarely was the overall package to be quite so refined or engaging as *The Big Sleaze*.

3. Corruption (Magnetic Scrolls, 1988)
Corruption was the product of Magnetic Scrolls at the very height of its powers. Eschewing the fantasy setting of the firm's other titles in favour of a deeply contemporary topic - insider dealing within the London financial sector - the game's Filofax-toting yuppie protagonist was up against

overwhelming odds right from the beginning of the story. With duplicitous colleagues, underworld operatives and many other lethal threats to deal with, *Corruption* is a game that yields rewarding new details every time it is played, and its deliberate juxtaposition of a gleaming, upmarket corporate world and the murky moral environment that lurks beneath its veneer is always perfectly pitched.

4. The Worm in Paradise (Level 9, 1985)
Level 9's *The Worm in Paradise* was an incredibly ambitious achievement. A damning indictment of authoritarianism and enforced conformity, the game blended knowing social allegories and inventive new in-game technologies to excellent effect. The end product is a world which never allows its far future setting to obscure its sense of humanity, and just exploring the strange city of Enoch seemed a weighty enough challenge before the player even considers solving the manifold mysteries contained within its confines.

5. Behind Closed Doors (Zenobi, 1988)
Only the Spectrum and John Wilson could have produced a game where the central premise revolves around a Balrog being locked in his own outside loo, but from such an unlikely concept was born a cult classic. *Behind Closed Doors* may have spawned three sequels, but I'll always have a soft spot for the classic single-location original. The game can be completed quite easily in just a handful of moves, thus ensuring the Balrog's freedom... but quite honestly, where would the fun be in that? For so many reasons, *Behind Closed Doors* really was one of a kind.
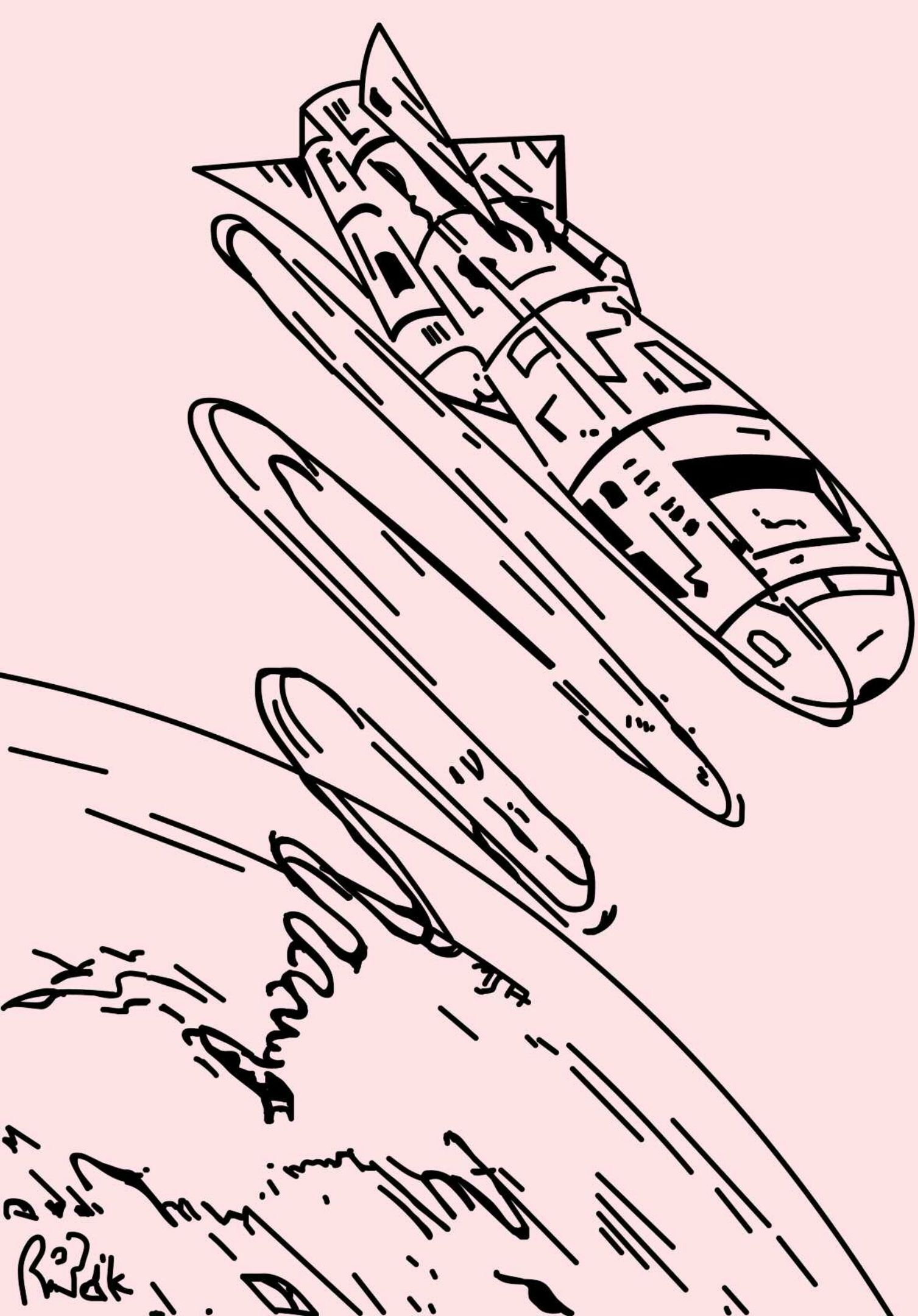
FSF ADVENTURES

After becoming hooked on *Sphinx Adventure*, a text adventure game bundled with his Acorn Electron, **Larry Horsfield** mapped his way through the Vampire's Castle and into a world of Fantasy and Science-Fiction.

Larry Horsfield first experienced computers whilst working for ASDA in Charlton in the mid 80s. In the times when supermarkets and other retailers had micros out on display Larry spent his tea breaks typing in simple programs from the user manuals and was hooked, finally buying his own Acorn Electron in 1986.

Sphinx Adventure was a text adventure game that came bundled with the Electron. He spent many days getting used to typing in directions, wandering around in the forest, but ultimately getting nowhere. It wasn't until contacting other adventurers and reading Pendragons' Adventure Pages in the Electron User magazine that he learnt the art of mapping and was finally able to find the troublesome Vampire's Castle, collect all the treasures and beat the game. In terms of adventuring, *Sphinx* was a very basic affair, especially for narrative, but Larry found it intoxicating.

It was the first ever text adventure I had ever played. As the game involved thinking and not fast reflexes – and also that I didn't have to listen to anything (I am deaf) – I took to the genre straight away.

Though it lacked support in all other game forms, the Electron was a good home for many text adventures at the time. Acornsoft provided several superb games, mostly ports of Peter Kilworth's BBC titles, but other publishers such as AdventureSoft and Level 9 developed versions of their games for the machine. The standout title, as it was on so many other machines, was Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

I bought *Twin Kingdom Valley* and this allowed you to save your game position and also had pictures – which I turned off very quickly. They slowed up the gameplay so much. I felt that graphics in text adventure games were largely a waste of memory which would be better spent on the actual gameplay.

Via the contacts page in Electron User, Larry connected with his first "computer friend", a man called Harry Bastien who lived in Tilbury and was a fellow adventure buff. Larry had switched jobs, working as a messenger in a government department.

I would have been extremely bored if it wasn't for the fact that I could spend the day working on my adventure maps and phoning Harry.

They both talked about writing their own adventures. Larry was an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy novels and had plenty of ideas for storylines and puzzles. He came across an advert for the Electron version of *The Quill*, purchased a copy and set about writing his first adventure that was called *Magnetic Moon.*

[The Quill] allowed people like myself, who have no computer programming training or skills whatsoever, to produce text adventure games very easily. I learnt the basics of using it, started programming and began making the story up as I went along.

Magnetic Moon was a sci-fi story inspired by the novel Sargasso of Space by Andre Norton. Larry's ambition was tempered by the lack of available memory on the Electron. After loading *The Quill* you'd be left with around 10K of usable memory. By the time he'd finished *Magnetic Moon*, the game was required to be split into three separate parts [multi-part games became something Larry would become notorious for]. He gave the game to Harry and a few other friends to play.

[They] tore it to shreds. I quickly learnt the things the players did and didn't like in a text adventure. I completely re-wrote the game and this time they gave it the thumbs-up.

To give himself something to do whilst out of work, Harry Bastien had setup "The Elk Adventure Club" – Elk being the pet-name owners gave to their Electron machines. It started as a monthly newsletter for adventure enthusiasts and every new member received a copy of *Magnetic Moon*. The new players seemed to enjoy the game, and Larry was inspired to create another three-part sequel called *Starship Quest*. It was another Andrew Norton novel-based game, and this time it was sold as a product via the Club, rather than being given away for free. The third Electron game from Larry was *Axe of Kolt* – a change in direction taking on a fantasy setting following the hero of the game, a mercenary swordsman called Alaric Blackmoon.

Even in 1986 having bought the machine brand new, support for the Acorn Electron was fading rapidly. As time ticked into 1987 virtually no new software was released for the machine. Larry looked around for another home for his adventuring talents.

The Elk Adventure Club folded through lack of interest and I realised that the Spectrum was by far the more popular machine. I decided to buy myself a 48k Spectrum and, as luck would have it, just after I got one, *The Professional Adventure Writing System* [PAWS], the successor to *The Quill* was released by Gilsoft.

Using the additional memory available on the Spectrum, Larry revamped all three of his Electron games for the new market. The additional memory didn't change his approach to game design.

I was able to get much more into the games on as I was on the Elk. Obviously with more memory to play around with I could expand the games quite a lot. The 128k Speccie enabled me to do 128k

versions of my games that were bigger and better than the 48k versions. One [design rule] I had was I saw no reason whatsoever for any "adult" content.

Adventure Probe magazine took the place of The Elk Adventure Club and Larry was exposed to a new audience of adventure players eager for good quality home grown software.

It was the start of Fantasy and Science Fiction Adventures, or FSF Adventures for short. *Magnetic Moon* was converted in 1988, and received a lukewarm response from Mike Gerrard in Your Sinclair magazine giving it a 6/10. The review seemed harsh going by Gerrard's own words, "The game had a few too many irritating responses for me. [...] There were several similar faults, but I have to say in spite of those I kept wanting to play the game as there was also a hell of a lot to enjoy about it. [...] I don't think anyone who buys it will be disappointed."

Regardless, it was a blow for Larry who had poured a lot of himself into his first game.

I recall I bought the magazine at WH Smiths on Cannon Street station in the City of London, where I was working as a messenger at the time. I stood in the middle of the station concourse, with hundreds of office workers streaming off the trains around me and I avidly read the review - I couldn't believe what I was reading! I was devastated, but took heart from the number of my friends who also read the review and told me that the review was most unfair and was no reflection on the quality of the adventure.

Starship Quest received two updated versions on the Spectrum. A standard 48K game, and an expanded 128K game with 20 more locations and extra gameplay and puzzles. Once again Larry was disappointed with the Your Sinclair review, even though the game received a slightly better 7/10 mark. Gerrard seemed to be overly critical of games, especially homegrown titles.

I realised that Mike Gerrard didn't like Sci-Fi based games. If you compare his reviews of *Magnetic Moon* and *Starship Quest* to the one for *The Axe of Kolt,* it was quite clear that he hadn't played the sci-fi games all the way through! When I was involved with the Elk adventure Club, any adventure that Harry Bastien reviewed was played from start to finish. Harry said then, and I have always agreed with this viewpoint, that you cannot write a fair review of any adventure if you only play a small part of it.

Axe was sent for review in 1990, and Larry's suspicions about Mike's loathing of Sci-Fi seemed to be well founded. The fantasy-based game received the magazine's coveted Megagame of the month award and scored 9/10. Gerrard said that Larry had "worked harder each time to produce a polished product full of features" and had "fulfilled all the promise of [his] earlier titles." It was even better in Crash where reviewer Paul Rigby said *Axe* was "a little gem – the best adventure game I've played this year" and gave it 93%

These were halcyon days for Larry and FSF. *Axe* was followed by sequel *The Spectre of Castle Coris*, and then another adventure, created for the first Adventure Probe convention featuring a female protagonist called *Run, Bronwyn, Run!*

[I wrote] *Run, Bronwyn, Run!* after one of my female friends complained that the heroes of text adventures were always men! There were many women who played text adventures – and they made the best playtesters! I had a team of playtesters who were mostly women. If one playtester didn't like something about my game I might ignore them , but if two or more did then I would change it!

The FSF customer list grew to over 200 regular patrons and for the first time Larry published games from third-parties, such as Bob Adams, Tony Collins and female author Kez Gray.

Kez sent me her game written in longhand on quite a few sheets of A4 writing paper. I started programming the game and soon noticed that she hadn't thought things through and I had to re-write some of the gameplay so that the game would "work".
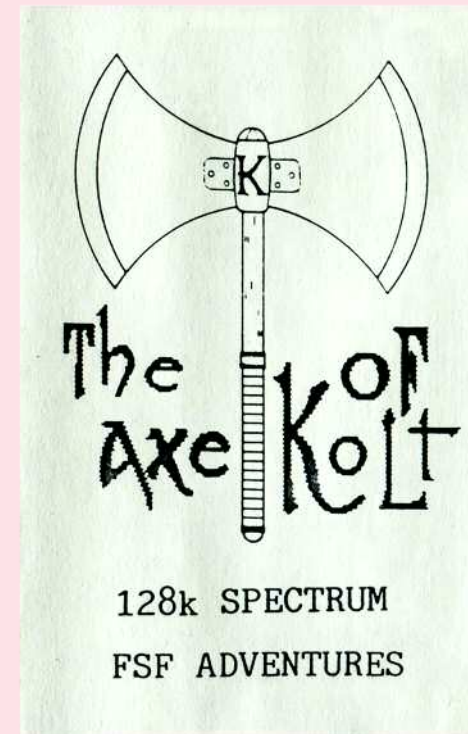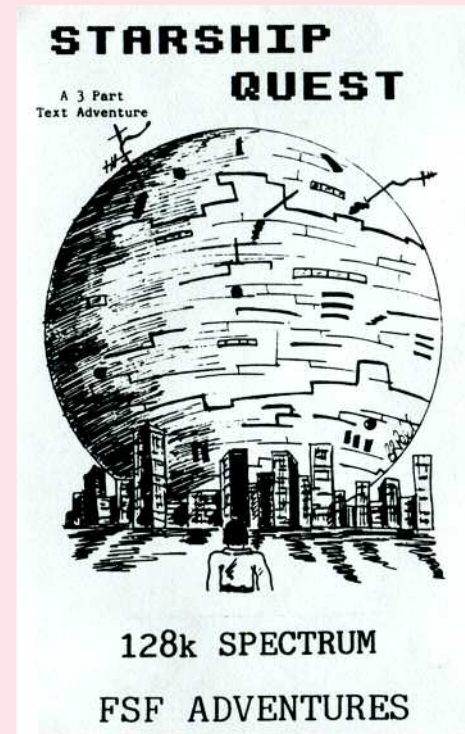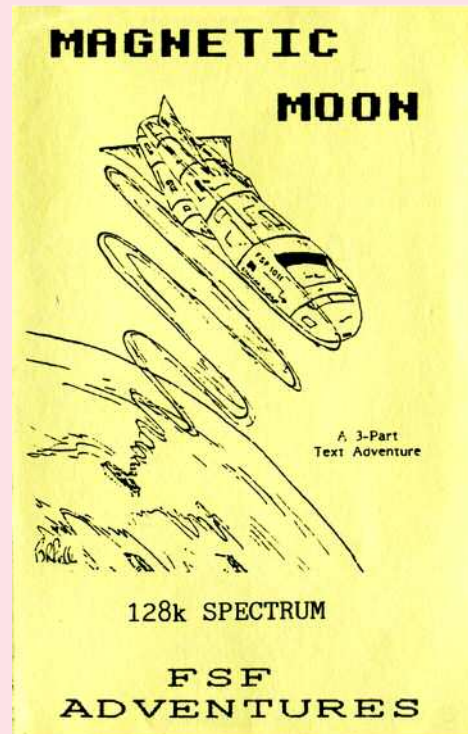
[Above] Larry extended his Acorn Electron trilogy of adventures to the ZX Spectrum.

CAST ADRIFT

If you want to play the updated versions of Larry's games using the ADRIFT system, visit his profile page here:

http://www.adrift.co/profile/2899

HORSFIELD HOMAGES

Larry had two adventures penned in his honour, *Murder at Hamilton Halls* and its sequel *The Spectre of Larry Horsfield,* both written by fellow adventure author, Sharon Harwood.

They are tongue-in-cheek games based in the Hamilton Halls public house next to Liverpool Street Station in the City of London. Characters that appear in the game are real people from the Hamilton Halls "gang", a group of 20 or so adventurers who would meet up in said pub every three months.

Krazy Kartoonist Kaper was the start of a wider collaboration between the duo, with Gray producing loading screen graphics for FSF's subsequent adventures. The success of FSF began to take its toll. Larry was still in full-time employment but undertook every single duty of being a publisher himself. He was still programming new games while organising playtesting of submitted games, sending out mailshots, and producing the cassette copies of each game by duplicating cassettes and creating the associated paper parts.

Each copied tape had to be test-loaded, and for this I used an old Spectrum +2 that was notorious for tape loading problems. If the game loaded ok on that, it would load on simply anything.

One part of running FSF that Larry enjoyed was receiving feedback from his customers. This could be direct via letter, or in person at the various conventions that Larry attended. A more direct connection with his customers came when he included his home number on a coded help sheet that he included with each game. It's completely unthinkable in today's world, but players would often pick up the phone and call asking for help.

I used to enjoy giving help over the phone and most people phoned at a reasonable time. I do remember that some male players didn't like admitting that they were stuck and would get their wives or girlfriends to phone instead. A three-way conversation would then take place and very often I had to insist that the player come on the line as the woman didn't have a clue as to what we were talking about!

Run, Bronwyn, Run was released in 1992 along with *Revenge of the Space Pirates.* By this time most people had moved to the Amiga or Atari ST and consoles were beginning to have a huge impact on game playing habits. The 8-bit text adventure market was all but dead. It was a pity that Larry had come into the industry late in the day in adventuring terms, as it seemed he had so much more to offer.

Orders began to dry-up and Larry decided to call it a day, with the cessation of FSF's bank account being the symbolic action of closing the book on that part of his life. But what was he to do with the many plot and story ideas for new games that he had? There was no *The Quill* or *PAWS* for the 16-bits, and he was hesitant to learn how to program on the new platforms. Instead he stayed with his faithful Spectrum and completed another game in the Alaric Blackmoon series, *Die Fuerfaust* or *The Fist of Fire.* It was sold via mail-order by Phil Reynolds' publisher The Adventure Workshop, who alongside Zenobi and Adventure Probe were one of the last bastions of 8-bit text adventuring throughout the 90s and into the early 2000s. It was
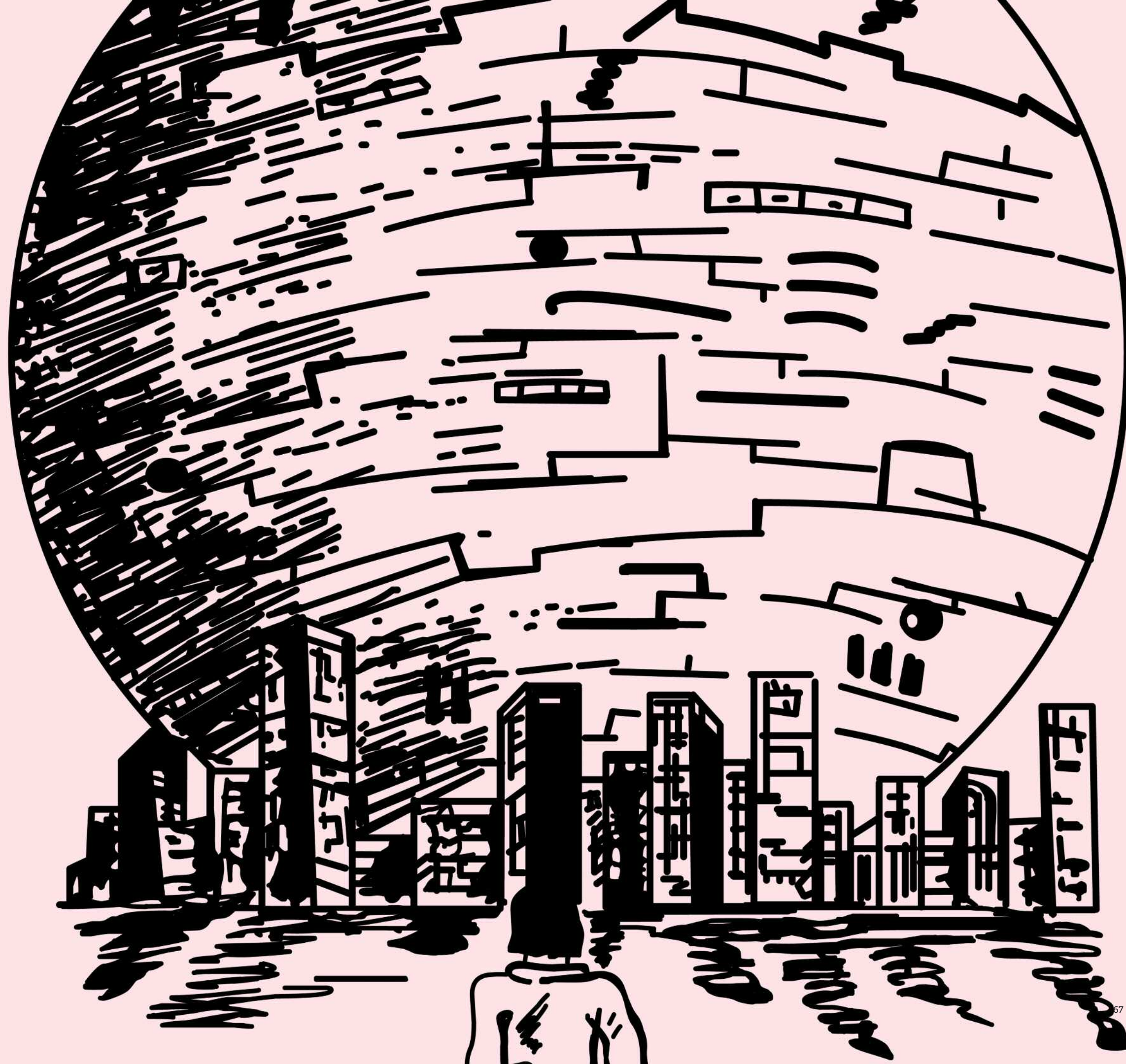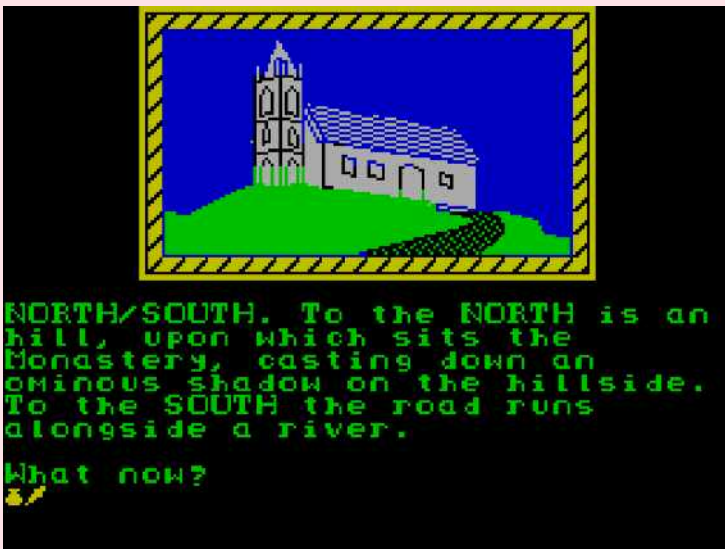
Barbara Gibb, editor of Adventure Probe that gave Larry the inspiration for his final Spectrum adventure.

I remarked jokingly that I was thinking of releasing *The First of Fire* as a one-part game. Barbara replied "What you, do a one-part game? Never!" As all my adventures had been multi-part games, I rose to the challenge and told Barbara that I would prove her wrong and write, from scratch, a one-part adventure. She told me "I'll believe it when it happens!", which made me even more determined.

Larry did prove Barbara wrong and created a game called *The Lost Children*, cheating slightly by creating a game using his Spectrum +3 and using all of the available 128K of memory for the text. Recently he has discovered *ADRIFT*, an application for writing complex interactive fiction games that has a version that will run on modern Windows platforms.

The first game I programmed using that was *Fortress of Fear*. As I had unlimited memory available to me, I went a bit over-the-top and the resulting game was enormous! I then set about re-writing the rest of my games using *ADRIFT*, starting with *The Axe of Kolt* and in November 2016 I released the *ADRIFT* version of *The Lost Children*. I recently released *Run, Bronwyn, Run!*, and *Magnetic Moon* is currently being playtested. My current work-in-progress is *Starship Quest*. These games, originally in 3 or more parts, can obviously be written as one game using *ADRIFT*.

Using the system Larry finished *The Fortress of Fear*, an incomplete Spectrum game that was written for the Adventure Probe Convention Megapoints Competition of 1996. And we also have *ADRIFT* to thank for Larry's continual engagement with the adventure scene, and his titles are being exposed to a new audience. It's a fantastic legacy.

I was stunned to see copies of my old games on sale for about £50 on the web! Obviously some people still like them! I like to think that I played a part in the text adventure scene (and still do!) and that my games brought enjoyment to some people.

[Above] Anthony Collins' *The Hermitage* was a game that came into the FSF fold containing dreaded location graphics. For the re-release they were replaced in typical Larry Horsfield-style with expanded text.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

FSF Adventures supremo **Larry Horsford** drags himself from the sea, and checks his pockets for the 5 text adventures he was able to salvage from the wrecked ship's cargo hold ...

I wouldn't want games, I would want a games creator such as *PAWS* or *ADRIFT*!

The Classic Adventurer
Written and designed by Mark James Hardisty

About the author

Mark James Hardisty is from Sheffield. His weekly pilgrimage to Just Micro as a child left him with an indelible love for Gremlin Graphics.

You can find Mark at @hardistymark, where he tweets about games, getting kids coding, The Cannonball Run, and his favourite game - *Elite* on the Acorn Electron.

This work is dedicated to:

My wonderful family – my mum Val, my beautiful wife Helen, and daughters Amelia Rose and Kitty Mae.

Fergus McNeill, a genius, and one of the kindest and humblest people I have had the pleasure of meeting.

MARK JAMES HARDISTY